

“In This Body and Life”
The Religious and Social Significance of Hermits and Hermitages in Eastern Tibet Today
and During Recent History

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Abstract

Tantric practices of meditation in seclusion have been prevalent in Tibetan religion, literature, history, landscape, and folklore since at least a millennium, yet their highly elitist and clandestine nature has hitherto effectively prevented their exploration and analysis. This dissertation therefore offers a unique contribution on the religious and social roles of hermitism in the Tibetan world. I begin by defining the pre-modern structure of a specific hermitic tradition with the help of the historical case study set in Eastern Tibet (Khams), but devote most attention to the examination of its revival in the transformed reality of contemporary Khams under the Chinese-communist rule. My ethnographic case study is the newly founded “meditation school of La phyi” (*La phyi sgom grwa*) situated in the remote area of sKyo brag, Nang chen county, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. I particularly focus on the agency of its founder and guru, the cotton-clad *gtum mo* accomplisher Tshul khrims mthar phyin (b. 1947), eulogized as the living embodiment of Mi la ras pa of the post-Mao and post-Deng era.

The overarching claim of this dissertation is that the ritual and social power of the Eastern Tibetan hermit lies in the performance, embodiment and final reconciliation of paradox – generally attaining soteriological goals in mundane life and specifically, resolving the dilemmas of Tibetans during times of perceived crisis.

Despite their apparent social inertia, Tibetan hermits have been active agents of religious, social and in a way, even political processes – not merely the products of these processes. I present their acts of renunciation as an essentially affirmative strategy, which activate networks that have sustained hermits, their lineages, practices, and training venues for centuries. I further assert that the reason for social empowerment of hermits lies in the radical nature of their choice, which by social agreement will not only inevitably generate liberation and enlightenment, but is even able to yield fruit “in this very body and life,” in emulation of the famous yogin-saint Mi la ras pa. At the apex of their path, hermits become the embodiments of both the vitality of the unique local identity and at the same time, of the universal power of enlightenment itself. I argue that the transformation of the body is crucial to the hermit’s ability to reconcile contradictions, which remain insoluble for other members of society: both the ontological dilemmas central to the human condition and simultaneously, the specific quandaries of Tibetans in times of social and political crisis.

The role of the hermit is especially important today, in the face of the recent cultural ruptures, the political and moral submission of Tibetans, as well as the rapid modernization imposed by the Chinese state on its minorities. In spite of all the changes that occurred within his lifetime, the modern saint Tshul khrims mthar phyin was able to transform his body into an expression of the ultimate narrative of enlightenment, while the individual narrative of his life continues to offer a universal paradigm for identity construction and successful dilemma resolution. Since these abilities also grant him global allure, I argue for a hermitic revival whose influence permeates the generally unyielding frontiers of the PRC. Meanwhile, in the mountains above the Eastern Tibetan village of sKyo brag, Tshul khrims mthar phyin may intend to lead others to liberation from the suffering inherent in human existence, but that does not exclude his participation in the revival of traditional culture and affirmation of local identity.

As the paradigm for effective dilemma resolution is projected into the local landscape, a new hermitage is founded. I present how venues for meditation in retreat develop into spheres of autonomy and power, extracted from local history and sacred geography. I argue that especially in times of crisis,

hermitages tend to form multi-faceted links with similar centers and evolve into a movement for counter-culture, which circumvents or speaks against the established power structures of the day. As such, venues like La phyi are initiated as a reaction to changes that compromise Khams pa autonomy and identity, owing its ongoing success to popularizing the prospect of resolution of both the specific concerns of the Tibetan minority in the PRC and of the general ontological paradoxes of the human condition. Moreover, since the revival of traditional cosmology performed at La phyi involves the restoration of interdependent social roles, the benefit of hermitic practice loses its exclusive nature and the option of dilemma reconciliation extends onto all members of the local community, including those who are not committed to the radical path of renunciation.

Finally, since La phyi is a hermitage for group training, I argue that the distinctiveness of individual transformation and social processes occurring within its boundaries contests the norms and trends promoted by official state ideology. This makes La phyi an alternative society, which nevertheless maintains the essentially religious character of its quest for liberation and enlightenment “in this body and life.”

The material for the ethnographic case study was collected in the course of two three-month-long journeys to Khams in 2007 and 2008 by means of participant observation, interviews and textual examination.

Synopsis of chapters

After the general introduction to pan-Tibetan hermitism included in Chapter One, Chapter Two briefly addresses the doctrines, practices and role models relevant for the development of Tibetan hermitic practices. Chapter Three discusses the distinctive traits of the Khams pa meditation tradition, codified from the second half of the 19th century by the non-sectarian, socio-religious Ris med movement. Chapter Four reviews the topic of the ethno-religious revival taking place in Khams today, provides its factual background and examines its possible theoretical explanations. Chapter Five is an essential introduction to the ethnographic case study itself, to the circumstances of research, its methodology, the specific challenges and limitations. Chapter Six provides the historical, geographic and doctrinal details necessary to contextualize the fieldwork material, whose description begins with Chapter Seven, devoted to the environment of the hermitage, i.e. the revival of the monastic-hermitic center of sKyo brag. Chapter Eight focuses on the founding of La phyi, the life stories of its initiator, Tshul khrims mthar phyin and his guru; it also expounds on the distinction between monasteries and meditation schools. In Chapter Nine, I depict the topography, daily life, regulations and the community of La phyi. Chapter Ten constitutes an analysis of the process of renunciation and the role it plays in the social and ritual empowerment of the studied hermits. Chapter Eleven describes the secret content of the La phyi curriculum and its scriptures as vehicles for liberation and transformation, while Chapter Twelve summarizes the principal agents of the La phyi project, their agendas and goals. This section also places La phyi in a broader context of the new hermitic movement and discuss its millenarian implications. Chapter Thirteen concludes the entire thesis by connecting both the “traditional” 19th-century hermitism as well as its revival in the changed reality of Khams today.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, hermit, hermitage, retreat, meditation, yogin, ethno-religious revival, Khams, Eastern Tibet, Ris med, gtum mo, Mi la ras pa, ras pa, 6 Yogas of Naro pa, Tantric Buddhism, power places, narrative map, sgrub brgyud, cotton-clad, 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud, Nang chen, sKyo brag, La phyi, 3-year retreat, embodiment

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I. Introduction

Tibetan Buddhism is commonly thought of as a monastic religion. Yet there is an assumption today, shared by Western academics and Tibetans alike, that the religious centers critical for the perpetuation of higher forms of Buddhism in Tibet are not monastic institutions, rather hermitages, and that the inhabitants of hermitages have been playing a decisive role in this process.¹

The highly elusive hermitic practices – mainly, but not exclusively, of Indian origin – have been prevalent across the Tibetan Plateau since at least a millennium, where Tibetans have maintained and developed Buddhist Tantric lineages that strongly rely on the practice of meditation in isolation. The following dissertation introduces some fundamental information on the topic and pertains to both the hermitic practices of pre-modern Tibet as well as its revival in Eastern Tibet today.

The goal of any meditation in retreat is identical with the objectives of Tantrism – liberation and enlightenment. Practices in isolation constitute a passage through a variety of stages of ritual competence, marked by different degrees and types of permissible interactions with the outside world. This is reflected in spoken Tibetan as well as in the classical language, since retreat is often referred to as *mtshams*, which denotes the ritual boundary between the hermit² and the outside world.

As ritual specialists and radical renunciates, Tibetan hermits have always been considered the absolute elite among religious circles. Since social hierarchy on the Plateau was mostly organized according to the degree of renunciation, they enjoyed great esteem in society as well as in political circles.³ It is just one of the many paradoxes surrounding Tibetan hermitism – that these individuals, who focus on accomplishing supra-mundane power would at the same time gain such enormous temporal authority.

Singling out retreat practice as a topic for an extensive discussion is artificial from the emic point of view, since meditation training is indispensable for the continuity of esoteric

¹ For instance, the 14th Shamar Rinpoche (=Zhwa dmar rin po che, b. 1952) in a public teaching given to a Western audience, which is all the more interesting when one realizes that this lama is himself a representative of several monastic communities. This claim became the direct inspiration behind the topic of the following thesis; I also thank Dr. Jim Rheingans for his suggestions on formulating the topic.

² In the following dissertation, unless indicated otherwise, I will use the term “hermit” to describe both female and male hermits.

³ Samuel 1993: 556-557.

transmissions⁴ and as such is fostered to a different degree by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism.⁵ Consequently, the general terms designating someone practicing in seclusion, like *mtshams pa* or *ri khrod pa*,⁶ etc., have never described any special group. Moreover, *rnal 'byor pa*, the equivalent of the Sanskrit “yogin,” is applied frequently to designate a meditator who is either still in training or is already accomplished. This latter term has been applied generously in diverse contexts, so that it is noticeable that hermits do not form any specific faction, but rather constitute a diffused socio-religious phenomenon.⁷ Nevertheless, I have decided to examine the meaning of isolated meditation in the lives of Tibetan Tantric practitioners and their supporters, especially in the case of those for whom retreat and renunciation is not limited to a period or periods of intense practice, rather constitutes a way of life.

Meditation training has been an indispensable element of most Buddhist lineages in the Tibetan world. Both in pre-modern Tibet and today, such schooling has had to take place primarily outside of monasteries, which are generally viewed as inappropriate for retreat. Before 1950, contrary to the popular myth of mystical Tibetan monks, monasteries cultivated a close exchange with the neighboring village and were deeply involved in politics and economic production. They were usually densely populated and many of the monks never received even basic education in meditation. Therefore, the continuing requirement for retreat practice, especially among the “practice lineages” (*sgrub brgyud*), which flourished primarily in schools beyond the reach of the dGe lugs pa power structures, has generated the appearance of scores of remote hermitages, devised according to the various typologies of retreat.

Thus, the designations *ri khrod/mtshams khang/dben gnas/sgrub phug/sgrub khang* apply to an entire plethora of diverse venues, which accommodate the different types of retreat. Their curricula and functions have been more or less dependent on the local religious hierarchy, and some types have been entirely appropriated into monasteries as structured programs for lama-training in a special enclosure above the monastery grounds (*sgrub khang/sgom khang/sgrub grwa/sgrub sde*). To a different extent, other types of hermitages could be reliant on the monastery, but do not have to be, which depends on the degree to which their main meditation instructor is bound to a particular institution.

⁴ In this work, the word “transmission” will be used to denote both a particular set of teachings and the act of transmitting them.

⁵ Although the dGe lugs school puts the least amount of emphasis on meditation, they also claim to possess some Tantric transmissions, which must be cultivated experientially.

⁶ *Ri khrod* literally means “mountain side” and implies that such hermitages are associated specifically with hills, while other types of hermitages could be labelled differently.

⁷ See Przyjemaska 2011.

There also exists an exclusively monastic custom of recurrent retreat, which, as tradition claims, dates back to the times of the Buddha and his *sangha*, described in English as “rainy-season retreat” (*dbyar gnas*).⁸

For the great distribution of monastics in Tibetan areas as well as the near monopolization of religious expertise by celibate renunciates, retreat has most often been performed by monks and nuns. It has also been observed by lay people or *sngags pa* practitioners; in these cases, celibacy is sometimes advised, with the exception of practitioners of a special yoga which involves the manipulation of sexual energy (*las kyi phyag rgya*), applied only by the most advanced practitioners in strict seclusion.

On such occasions, the hermitage is completely closed to the world and the territory may be ritually sealed (*bcad rgya*) to protect the secrecy (*gsang ba*) of the methodology and of the transformation process; at other times, the practitioner will simply live and practice in a remote cabin (*mtshams khang*) or cave (*sgrub phug*) beyond the range of domestic economy and thus abstain from human company without the need for ritual confinement. Especially the latter, less formal type has often been chosen as a lifestyle for already accomplished meditators (currently referred to as *sgrub thob* in Eastern Tibet), who have especially exhibited the tendency to reside in power places (*gnas*). An acclaimed master may also retire into the privacy of his residence, located usually above the monastery grounds to lead the life of a hermit, choosing to occasionally leave retreat and perform ritual service or exchange teachings with other experts. In such cases, retreat surroundings may serve him not only for meditation, but also for instructing disciples in both esoteric and scriptural lineages, but also as venue for literary and artistic composition - and Tibetan hermitages have for centuries been significant sources of cultural production. Occasionally, especially in the case of lamas who functioned as important reincarnations (*sprul sku*), retreat was performed as an element of political discourse.

However, retreat is generally understood as meditation training. Contrary to another popular myth surrounding hermitism, where the hermit is always alone from the beginning, the retreat is likely to start with a group of meditators who are either engaging in the same practices (Skt. *sādhana*, Tib. *sgrub thab/nyams len*), as in the case of training in the *sgrub khang*, or advancing from one practice to the next at their own pace. At times, a structured meditation program may be linked to the commitment to stay in retreat for a temporally structured curriculum.

⁸ The term *dbyar gnas* actually means “summer residence” but it connotes the yearly ritual withdrawal of the *sangha*.

Training in a group will also vary with regard to the type of supervision. The master (*sgrub dpon*) may live on site with the retreatants or visit occasionally. More advanced meditators often practice in absolute isolation for years and rely on their own experience rather than on the instructions of a visiting meditation teacher. Completely solitary retreat can obviously differ with regard to the content of the practice, but also with regard to the level of assistance, or lack thereof, with supplying provisions. Whether practitioners are supported by their family, local villagers, their monastery, or teacher or whether they will rely on yearly begging rounds or personal savings, is highly dependent on the individual case.

Moreover, retreat can be an expression of an individual choice, e.g. when the meditator decides to adhere to one or more types of solitary practice for the course of his or her entire life (*tshe mtshams*); meditators can also opt for occasional, temporary periods of intense meditation in seclusion that complements their life in a monastery, college (*bshad grwa*) or their activity as Tantric masters. Depending on one's personal style, the funding, the style of one's guru, and the specific *sāadhanās* performed, the life in retreat will vary – from fairly comfortable to radically austere, with ascetic elements that may include long-term fasting, never lying down, sleep deprivation, living in a simple cave, etc.

The content of retreat is conditioned by the specific lineage or school, one's earlier experience (which could also encompass former lifetimes) and position in the religious hierarchy, as well as one's personal wishes. Here, one will either focus on one main practice for the duration of the whole seclusion or will train in a sequence of mind-body techniques that are especially meant as a preliminary path (*sngon 'gro*) leading to more sophisticated meditation methods. At times, seclusion is performed in propitiation of a deity (*sgrub chen*), where the meditator may practice for several days and nights without interruption; at other times, a *sāadhanā* will require the observance of special conditions and vows, such as meditating in complete darkness (*mun mtshams*); complete silence, ritual fasting, etc.

The content could be quantity-oriented, whereby an accumulation of a certain number of mantras or repetitions of rituals is the temporal goal; or the content may focus directly on the far-reaching goals of liberation (*thar pa*) and buddhahood (*sangs rgyas pa/byang chub*, etc.). It is these latter objectives that have frequently motivated people to become life-long hermits (*tshe mtshams pa*) as they strive for attainment “in this very body and life” (*sku tshe de nyid la*)⁹ following the footsteps of Mi la ras pa, the most famous of all Tibetan hermits.

⁹ From the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (=BGT). Zhang Yisun 1985, 2: 2081, s.v. “Mi la ras pa.”

For all the richness of Tibetan hermitic practices, the typologies mentioned above may become interlaced or alternate in the life of a single practitioner. This dissertation will especially focus on the life-long commitment to hermitic practice and lifestyle in order to achieve the ultimate goals of buddhahood “in this body and life,” even if punctuated with periods of religious activity (imparting instructions and empowerments) or entwined with cultural production, like in the case of several recognized expert-hermits. I will analyze the religious and social activity of hermits, challenging the widespread preconception of the hermit as a passive and detached member of society.

As the hermit requires training to develop this influence, I will especially concentrate on the collective schooling of beginners in the so-called “meditation schools” (*sgom grwa/sgrub grwa/sgrub khang*, etc.). These schools are especially interesting for several reasons. Firstly, they accommodate a special type of a community, bound by its own rules; secondly, their topography frequently mirrors the progression of individual inhabitants and is graded with carefully defined steps, some of which may involve ritual display of accomplishment. The level of individual experience is assessed by one’s spiritual instructor, and once established, the experience determines the place in the religious and social hierarchy with all of the respective implications along with the place within the physical location of the hermitage. Due to the ritual and social ambiguity of meditation school inhabitants, the group hermitage becomes an ideal place for observing the relationship between Tantric transformation and social empowerment.

I.1. Theses and aims

The goal of Tantric practice lies beyond the scope of a particular life. Yet as the absolute perspective of enlightenment is approached by people living under specific historical circumstances, these very conditions become the basis for the process of transformation, since the conditions define the initial identity of the practitioner, their potential for change and their subsequent activity as guru. Therefore, this thesis will look into instances of hermitic practice in times of political and social change in the 19th century and today in order to determine how the mundane world from outside the hermitage permeates into the process of religious transformation and how the effects of this transformation affect the world.

The overarching claim of this dissertation is that the ritual and social power of Tibetan hermits in the pre-modern times and today has been reliant on their performance, embodiment and final reconciliation of paradox – both in terms of attaining soteriological goals and resolving this-worldly dilemmas.

In order to prove my claim, I will first present the emergence of the unique hermitic tradition of Eastern Tibet (Khams) through the workings of the 19th century non-sectarian Ris med movement. I will demonstrate how the specific ritual make-up, generated and popularized by that movement, was codified into the convention revived in Khams pa hermitages today. To illustrate the modern revival of hermitism, I will analyze the case of a new “meditation school of La phyi” (*La phyi sgom grwa*) located in the area of sKyo brag, in Yushu TAP, Qinghai. I will particularly focus on the agency of its founder and guru, the cotton-clad *gtum mo* accomplisher Tshul khrim mthar phyin (b. 1947), eulogized as the living embodiment of Mi la ras pa of the post-Mao and post-Deng era.

The thesis will show that despite their apparent social inertia, Tibetan hermits have been active agents of religious, social and in a way, even political processes – not only their products. They are dynamic participants of the changing culture as well as empowered individuals, who sustain and revitalize mechanisms necessary for the perpetuation of tradition. Moreover, for all their isolation, they do not achieve that alone. I will present their acts of renunciation as an essentially, and perhaps unexpectedly affirmative strategy, which activates networks that have sustained hermits, their lineages, practices, and retreat venues for centuries. I will also demonstrate why the very world hermits reject has been contributing to the perpetuation of these highly elitist and clandestine practices.

I will further disclose how the reason for social empowerment lies in the radical nature of the hermits’ life choice, designed to produce liberation and enlightenment “in this body and life,” in emulation of the famous yogin-saint Mi la ras pa. As this phrase suggests, through their exclusive focus on the performance of tradition, not only the hermits’ minds, but also their bodies become transformed. I will argue that it is the embodiment of Tantric accomplishment, communicated with the help of signs, celebrated in narratives well known throughout the Tibetan world, that has the ultimate power to resurrect the power of the Khams pa Buddhist tradition, especially in times when identity and tradition are threatened, questioned or contested by other pasts.

I will depict how the indigenous confidence in the transcendence of a personal self empowers expert-hermits to embody simultaneously the uniquely Eastern Tibetan identity and the universal power of enlightenment. I will argue that in consequence, the accomplished hermit becomes a mirror that reflects collective sentiments, which in Khams since the 19th century has mainly been the urgency of autonomy and protection of the religious tradition, local histories of power, as well ethnic uniqueness. I will demonstrate how even today, in the post-Mao reality of Eastern Tibet, the body of the hermit can become an expression of the

ultimate narrative of enlightenment, while the individual narrative of their life can turn into a paradigm for realizing the universal perfection in all beings.

Through the founding of a new hermitage, this paradigm finds its application in the local landscape. I will present how hermitages develop into centers of power, extracted from local history and sacred geography by expert-hermits, who tame the natural environment and reveal the narratives of power concealed within. These accomplishments become convincing arguments not only for the legitimization of expert-hermits as founders of new practice centers, but also as ritual masters and social leaders. Evident in the case of Tshul khriims mthar phyin is that hermitic accomplishment may eventually open a back door into the upper strata of religious hierarchy for people who do not represent the authority of a reincarnate lineage so that they are able to reach a position which normally remains beyond their reach.

Having attained the highest religious and social ranks, hermits will still be more likely to spread their influence through establishing new hermitages, rather than monasteries. Using historical and contemporary examples, I will argue that especially in times of crisis, hermitages tend to form multi-faceted links with similar centers and evolve into a movement for counter-culture, which circumvents or speaks against the religious and political establishment of the day. As such, venues like La phyi are initiated as a reaction to changes that compromise Khams pa autonomy and identity, owing its ongoing success to popularizing the prospect of resolution of both the specific concerns of the Tibetan minority in the PRC and of the general ontological paradoxes of the human condition.

La phyi *sgom grwa* is a facility for collective meditation training. I will argue that the distinctiveness of individual transformation and social processes occurring within its boundaries speaks against the norms of the modern Chinese state, making La phyi an alternative society. Though radical in its emphasis on complete renunciation, the La phyi project is vital for restoring the validity of Tantric cosmology and local tradition for identity construction of Khams pa Tibetans today, *vis-à-vis* the instrumentalization, deprivation and modernization enforced by the Beijing government. At the same time, the hermitage has managed to maintain its essentially religious character in its determination for liberation and enlightenment “in this body and life.”

I.2. Methodology and some notes on terminology

The current thesis was composed on the basis of an investigation of both Western and Tibetan literature as well as ethnographic field research, which included interviews, participant observation and textual study of contemporary Tibetan-language sources. For the

far-flung temporal scope of the thesis and the specific conditioning of the fieldwork among Khams pa hermits, all details pertaining to the collection of ethnographic data will be clarified in a separate chapter prior to the chapters dealing with the case study.

In this paper, the terms “Tibet” and “Tibetan” will correspond to the ethnographic definition including the ethnic Tibetan regions of A mdo, Khams and dBus tsang. Although diversified in many ways, their societies have been closely related by means of a Buddhist culture, in the perpetration of which schools (*chos lugs*) and lineages (*brgyud*) described in this thesis played a vital role. What is more, since the 1950s, these territories have been included into the PRC. Although divided as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan, their societies have been incorporated into the multiethnic Chinese state under the common designation of the “Tibetan national minority” (Chin. *Zangzu*).¹⁰ Since this work will focus on Khams, which is part of ethnographic Tibet and whose inhabitants are under the domination of the PRC as members of the Tibetan minority, I will describe the natives of Khams as “Tibetans.”

Another important clarification concerns the expression “ascetic.” I will employ it to describe Tibetan hermits, according to the definition of Buddhist asceticism as coined by Kishore Mishra:

The essence of Buddhistic asceticism consists not in any course of painful penance, privation or toil inflicted upon a person but in a way of life in which some channels of activity are barred and others developed by special training. In this sense only, Buddhism is ascetic.¹¹

I.2.1. Relevance of the topic

I.2.1.1. Preliminary scholarly works

Despite the omnipresence of hermitism in Tibetan religion and biography, the subject has been acutely underrepresented in Western Tibetology. There may be different reasons for this underrepresentation, such as the secrecy of the Tantric procedures, the inaccessibility of hermitages or the general unwillingness on the side of the expert renunciates to contribute to scholastic undertakings.¹² Moreover, in the recent decades, since the communist-Chinese

¹⁰ For the definition of “Tibetan” compare Huber 2008:1 and Terrone 2009:74.

¹¹ Mishra 1987:23. The activities barred are the ones associated with the concept of *samsara*, i.e. having to do with economic production, family, sexuality, entertainment, etc. The ones developed deal with the practice of methods to achieve *nirvāṇa*. See Chapter Ten for more.

¹² See the Introduction to Chapter Four where I present the field research as well as the problematic its collection entailed.

conquest of Eastern Tibet and the resulting suppression of the indigenous culture, genuine Tantric specialists have become increasingly difficult to find.

Concerning the modest amount of works that express an academic interest in Tibetan hermitism, they are usually entirely descriptive, such as the pithy accounts of hermitic observances in Tucci's "Religions of Tibet."¹³ Some authors have managed to entirely circumvent the topic even in the context of Tibetan ascetic practices, as in the article by Thurman, which completely leaves out the subject of meditation in retreat.¹⁴

Important preliminary research on the topic of monastic communities committed to renunciation was carried out by Goldstein and Tsarong.¹⁵ "The Yogins of Ladakh" by Crook and Low offers a considerable piece of ethnographic data, but the observations of the authors are oriented toward cognitive sciences as such and overlook the vital mechanisms of ritual and social empowerment, which I believe are essential to the proper understanding of Tantric practice in Tibetan societies. However, one must acknowledge that the work does present a valuable discussion on the Mahāmudrā lore and the hermitic ethos of secrecy.¹⁶

Very little critical analysis has been attempted on the topic of Tibetan hermitism, except for the works focused on the legendary hermit Mi la ras pa authored by Tiso, Quintman, Powers or Bjørnvig. Tiso's research on the figure of Mi la ras pa provides a largely theoretical, comparative perspective of sainthood in the Indo-Tibetan Tantric tradition.¹⁷ However, the author's treatment of Mi la ras pa as paradigmatic for the Tibetan idea of sainthood barely touches on the topic of his social impact and position in the religious hierarchy.

The biographical tradition of Mi la ras pa was analyzed by van Tuyl¹⁸ and Tiso,¹⁹ and continued by Quintman and Roberts, who especially focuses on Mi la ras pa's disciple Ras chung pa.²⁰ Quintman delivers an excellent interpretation of Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition with regard to its geographic aspects;²¹ Powers initiates a brief but noteworthy discussion on conflict and dissolution in Mi la ras pa's life, including insights from psychology, religious studies and anthropology.²² Bjørnvig's contribution is certainly original,

¹³ Tucci 1980: 156-157.

¹⁴ Thurman 2002.

¹⁵ Goldstein & Tsarong 1985.

¹⁶ Crook & Low 1997.

¹⁷ Tiso 1989.

¹⁸ Van Tuyl 1971.

¹⁹ Tiso 1989, 1996 and 1997.

²⁰ Quintman 2008, Roberts 2007.

²¹ Quintman 2008.

²² In fact, one of the main claims of this dissertation of the hermit resolving paradox was inspired by the article by Powers (1992).

yet its value is difficult to assess, since the author discusses the 15th-century account of the life of the 11th-century hermit with the help of methodologies coined by Nietzsche and a number of Western analytical philosophers.²³

As for the geographic aspect of the current study and its focus on Eastern Tibet, Geoffrey Samuel has very accurately termed Khams “artificially peripheral.”²⁴ It is true that despite the cultural importance of this area, it has not been adequately represented in scholarship, which is also due to the fact that the majority of writings on Tibetan Buddhism or Tibetan culture/s deal with Central Tibetan areas and concern the largely dGe lugs pa-dominated religion.

Yet it was in Khams, around local centers of religious and political authority and away from unified state power, where the practice lineages flourished. For this reason, especially the Khams pa dominions of sDe dge and Nang chen have come to play a vital role in the perpetuation of Tibetan Tantrism. The sDe dge kingdom has to some extent been portrayed by Hartley²⁵ and by Rinzin Thargyal,²⁶ but the nomadic realm of Nang chen, where our case study is located, and which was famed for many great hermits, itinerant yogins, retreat sites and incarnation lineages, has remained unknown to the Western audience. The only exception is the highly entertaining oral history, collected from the autobiographical anecdotes of Urgyen Tulku.²⁷ The hermitic 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school, instrumental for the formation of Nang chen, which flourished almost exclusively within this kingdom, has not been examined, with the exception of some facts from its 13th-century histories, described by Sperling and Tsering and surrounded by a number of misconceptions.²⁸

Other mentions of Nang chen are informative but pithy: Sperling's excellent introduction to a Tibetan-language chronicle of local clans offers a valuable sketch of the political structure of the kingdom;²⁹ in David Jackson's *Saint in Seattle* the yogin-scholar Dezhung Rinpoche presents valuable historical details on the past of the greater Yushu area.³⁰ Contrary to these sources, there is an entire section on Nang chen's history in Gruschke's *Kham Vol 2: The Qinghai Part of Kham*.³¹ This last contribution is a well-intentioned, but quite unsuccessful

²³ Bjørnvig 2007.

²⁴ Samuel 2005: 296.

²⁵ Hartley 1997.

²⁶ Rinzin Thargyal, et al. 2007.

²⁷ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005.

²⁸ Sperling 2004 and 1987. Also see Puchung 2001.

²⁹ Sperling 2003.

³⁰ D.P. Jackson 2003.

³¹ Gruschke 2004.

attempt at historical coherence, which resorts to Chinese sources as the sole textual basis for research.

Scholarship on the Ris med revival began with the recently deceased savant Gene Smith. Nevertheless, in spite of the far-reaching influence of this 19th century movement, there has been little development since 1970 when Smith's Introduction to Kong sprul's *Shes bya mdzod* was published.³² The extensive work by Dieter Schuh on the life and activity of Kong sprul is almost exclusively descriptive; Samuel offers a number of insightful glances from the socio-historical perspective in a chapter of his groundbreaking *Civilized Shamans*. The aforementioned work by Hartley illuminates the structures of the sDe dge kingdom, which became instrumental in the activity of the non-sectarian movement; finally, there is the highly valuable study by Alexander P. Gardner,³³ whose outstanding explanation of the ritual and social implications of Eastern Tibetan sacred geography completes the extensive, but perhaps also superficial presentations by Zangpo.³⁴ Andreas Doctor's work, dedicated to the revelations of mChog gyur gling pa and an article by Diana Cousens which focuses on the gTer ma discoveries of mKhyen brtse most probably conclude the list of publications on critical Ris med research, although they also present the revealers only as ritual masters, much in the manner of the indigenous *rnam thar* convention.³⁵

Publications on Ris med in Western languages are crowned by the inspired tales of the movement's heirs like Tulku Urgyen, Dezhung Rinpoche or Dilgo Khyentse³⁶; the plethora of other mentions of the non-sectarian movement, usually in forewords to English publications of Kong sprul's works, is repetitive and non-analytical.

As far as the current ethno-religious revival in Khams is concerned, its studies have only just begun, although noteworthy explorations of revival of singular ritual traditions have been carried out by several authors already. Thus, Huber, Wenbin and Karmay³⁷ focus on popular practices, fringe religiosity (Diemberger)³⁸ or gender issues (Makley, Havnevik).³⁹ Havnevik's monograph on Tibetan nuns is an important contribution, although the ethnographic research was conducted entirely among the diaspora outside the PRC. Parallel to a significant and extensive study of the ethno-religious revival by Makley, the work by Mona

³² E. G. Smith 1970.

³³ Gardner 2007.

³⁴ Ngawang Zangpo 2001 and Kong sprul, et al. 1994.

³⁵ Doctor 2005, Cousens 2002.

³⁶ Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008.

³⁷ Huber 2002 b and 2006, Wenbin 1998, Karmay 1994.

³⁸ Diemberger 2005.

³⁹ Makley 2007, Havnevik 1994.

Schrempf⁴⁰ centers mainly on local context within Amdo, whose historical and cultural background is entirely different to Khams.

Tsering Thar's article about a reconstructed Bon po hermitage in Khams initiated the study of the contemporary Khams pa hermitic culture.⁴¹ Further examples of works which come closest to the current thesis are the papers by Germano and Terrone, describing the Tantric, elitist forms of the revival.⁴² They additionally correspond to my own field research either in terms of the areas of interest (former Nang chen kingdom) or with regard to personal connections between the leading agents, although neither of these works directly deals with the topic of hermitism.

Beyond the Tibetan context, Wen-jie Qin presents a comprehensive and convincing picture of the Buddhist revival in China proper, and her research was conducted in similar circumstances of a remote center for committed religious practice.⁴³ Furthermore, Stanley J. Tambiah has provided an insightful analysis of a contemporary Theravada hermitage in Thailand, focused around a charismatic master.⁴⁴

1.2.1.2. Tibetan hermit as a popular figure in the West

Geoffrey Samuel mentions that Tibetan Buddhism became popular among Western Buddhist movements mainly through their embracement of meditation experience as central to the practice of Buddhism.⁴⁵ Consequently, meditation and retreat have been a topic of many publications, addressed to this audience. Since the 1920's, owing it to the wave of general public interest in Tibet and its variety of Buddhism, numerous narratives of lives and inspired poetry attributed to famous Tibetan hermits were rendered into Western languages,⁴⁶ headed by W. Y. Evans-Wentz *Tibet's Great Yogī Milarepa*,⁴⁷ followed by further editions of the *Mi la'i mgur 'bum*, as well as by a comic strip and a recent film by the Bhutanese reincarnate Chokling (=mChog gling). Since they are not meant for an academic audience, these different versions and editions of the archetypical hermitic narrative suffice as a published translation and contain little or no critical remarks.

⁴⁰ Schrempf 2001 and 2002.

⁴¹ Tsering Thar 2002.

⁴² Germano 1998; Terrone 2010.

⁴³ Qin 2000.

⁴⁴ Tambiah 1988.

⁴⁵ Samuel 2005: 291-292.

⁴⁶ To name but a few: Zhabs dkar, et al. 2001, Stearns 2001, Schaeffer 2004, Allione 2000, Ko brag pa, et al. 2000.

⁴⁷ Evans-Wentz 2000 (1928).

Travelers like David-Neel have provided remarkable accounts of clandestine meditation practices and yogas; and the famed three-year-three-fortnight retreat curriculum designed by 'Jam mgon Kong sprul has even been published in English.⁴⁸ Countless books authored by Tibetan lamas expound upon the subject of meditation,⁴⁹ even its most advanced kinds; and publications like Glenn Mullin's *Six Yogas of Naropa* go as far as to reveal details of the most clandestine practices passed down orally by generations of hermits.⁵⁰

The importance of narratives of Mi la ras pa and other hermits for the construction of an image of "Tibet" and perhaps even the "mythos of Tibet" in the West should not be underestimated. Especially, the consecutive renderings and editions of gTsang smyon's *Mi la'i mgur 'bum* in all probability turn it into the most popular Tibetan text around the world today. The popularity of Mi la ras pa in the West has contributed to the development of the fantasy which depicts Tibet as a holy land inhabited by exalted beings; these narratives also promote both the elitist Tantric culture and Tibetan folklore. Hence today, even prominent representatives of the dGe lugs pa school, more known for its monastic and scholastic approach and political dominance than meditation, such as the Dalai Lama or Lama Zopa have regularly appropriated the figure of Mi la ras pa in their writings or speeches before the Western public.⁵¹

I.3. Synopsis of chapters

Generally speaking, this thesis will present a socio-historical perspective on "traditional" Khams pa hermitism, blended with contemporary data stemming from ethnographic field research. Their connecting historical plane is the activities of religious restoration headed by famous hermits, which occurred in the 19th century and which take place today as well.

After the introduction to the topic of Tibetan hermitism included in the current Chapter One, Chapter Two briefly brings up the doctrines, practices and role models relevant for the development of the Tibetan hermitic lore, particularly in the *sgrub brgyud* or practice lineages. Special attention is drawn to the paradigmatic function of the figure of Mi la ras pa and to introducing analytical tools, applied throughout the entire thesis.

Chapter Three discusses the distinctive traits of the Khams pa meditation tradition, codified from the second half of the 19th century by the non-sectarian, socio-religious Ris med

⁴⁸ David-Neel 1971 (1932), Ngawang Zangpo 2001.

⁴⁹ To name but a few examples: Kalu Rinpoche, et al. 1997; Gendün Rinpoche, et al. 2010, Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 1999.

⁵⁰ Mullin 1997.

⁵¹ Dalai Lama, et al. 1995: 9.

movement. I will present how the network of hermitages, established and developed by this movement, became vital for the construction of the unique Khams pa culture and identity, endowed with the power to alleviate the socio-political predicaments of their day.

Chapter Four addresses the topic of the broad revival of the Buddhist tradition in Khams today, provides its factual background and examines its possible theoretical explanations.

Chapter Five is an essential introduction to the case study itself, to the circumstances of research, its methodology, specific challenges and limitations. In these sections, I also disclose my own position in the field, which helped me gain access to the highly clandestine sphere of the La phyi hermitage.

Chapter Six provides the historical, geographic and doctrinal details necessary to contextualize the fieldwork material. Therein, I present some of my preliminary studies on the previously unknown history of the nomadic Nang chen kingdom, ruled by hermits and fostered by the great political powers of their day. I also briefly investigate the almost unknown 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school, which contributed to the emergence of the Nang chen as polity and experiences a rapid revival today, especially in the area of sKyo brag, which will be shown in the example of the meditation school of La phyi.

The description of the case study itself begins in Chapter Seven. It is devoted to the environment of the hermitage, i.e. the revival of the monastic-hermitic center of sKyo brag. I list its principal contributors, such as gSal byed rin po che, and investigate how their strategies do not only mirror and directly quote the Ris med era, but also include a number of supra-local, and even global factors.

Chapter Eight focuses on the process of founding of La phyi, as well as on the life stories of its initiator, Tshul khri ms mthar phyin and his guru Karma nor bu bzang po. It also discusses the distinction between monasteries and meditation schools, historically and especially today, when the popularity of hermitages is conditioned politically. Moreover, the connection between La phyi and the sKyo brag monastery is presented as an example of two different ritual spheres which may nevertheless engage in cooperation and exchange.

In Chapter Nine I depict the most conspicuous stratum of the La phyi hermitage: its topography, daily life, regulations and community. Especially the physical setting is investigated, since it reveals a great deal about the construction of ritual scenery. This portrait of hermitage's outer facade is completed with the description of its special relationship with another, similar location of Ya chen chos sgar, whose remoteness from La phyi makes their connection even more intriguing.

In Chapter Ten, I explore the inner lives of the La phyi meditators by accounting their individual stories of vocation. These sections constitute an analysis of the process of renunciation and the role it plays in the social and ritual empowerment of hermits. Special attention is drawn to the final stage of re-connection of accomplished hermits with the society; this re-connection is illustrated via the example of Tshul khirms mthar phyin. A powerful symbol of accomplishing this stage is his ritual garb – the white, cotton robe of a *ras pa*, which in the reality of post-Mao Khams, is capable of conveying more than the traditional articulations of Tantric prowess.

Chapter Eleven describes the secret content of the La phyi curriculum and its scriptures as vehicles for liberation and transformation. Herein, I explore how their seemingly conventional Buddhist rhetoric develops a specific meaning in today's sKyo brag. I also discuss the role of texts in ascetic practice.

Chapter Twelve summarizes the principal agents of the La phyi project, their agendas, relations and goals. Moreover, these sections place La phyi in a broader context of the new hermitic movement and discuss its millenarian implications.

Chapter Thirteen closes the entire thesis with conclusions that connect both “traditional,” 19th-century hermitism as well as its revival in the changed reality of Khams today.

II. Early trends and hermitic role models in the Tibetan practice lineages

II.1. Introduction

Due to the pervasiveness and great variety of Tibetan hermitic lifestyles, characterizing all of their respective paradigms, practices and teachings lies beyond the scope of this work. It is also not my aim to present a continuous development of these lifestyles, rather to merely expound upon the characteristic traits of Tibetan hermitism, which are relevant to the different periods of religious revival. It is essential to view them within their historical context as the Tibetans do. One of the primary traits of Tibetan Buddhism is the legitimation of any ritual activity through its connection with an established lineage.

The present chapter will briefly cover early religious developments central to the trends characterizing Eastern-Tibetan hermitism in the recent past as well as today. The doctrines, practices and role models relevant to the emergence of the unique Khams pa hermitic tradition will be introduced with the help of specific analytical tools in their historical context. These tools, specifically the Samuelian *clerical-shamanic* dichotomy and its derivatives, will support the historical examination of the consolidation of the hermitic tradition in Eastern Tibet as well as the ethnographic study of the contemporary Khams pa meditation training facility found in subsequent chapters.

Thus, in the sections below, I shall briefly delineate how some of the vital issues connected with Tibetan hermitism originally developed within the particular practice lineages. I shall focus primarily on the origination of hermitic practices in the bKa' brgyud schools revived today.

II.2. Late dissemination period and a new synthesis

The original dissemination period of the Buddhist teachings in Tibet began in the 7th century and provided Tibetans with access to the doctrine already so popular among other Asian states. In the 9th century, after a period of stagnation, a great revival took place. However, the 10th century rulers of Pu hrang, such as Ye shes 'Od (947-1024), who later became a monk himself, were principally interested in reviving Buddhist scholasticism and monasticism rather than Tantra and even opposed some Tantric interpretations, viewed as heresy.⁵²

⁵² Samuel 1993: 466-467.

The Bengali master Atiśa Dipankaraśrījñāna (983?-1054), invited to Tibet during that period was not only, as expected by his royal patron of Pu hrang, a representative of the institutionalized and monastic form of Buddhism, but also a highly developed Tantric practitioner. His training at Vikramaśīla university reflected the contemporary trend in Indian Buddhism, which had an adept study philosophy as well as engage in the ritual practices of the Vajrayāna. As a result, Atiśa's activity in Tibet proved that it was possible to combine what Tibetans, the king first and foremost, had believed to be antithetical: the rational aspect of Buddhism represented by study or ethical conduct with the mysticism and rites found in the Tantras. Thus, Atiśa's arrival in Tibet initiated a new trend: his missionary success set an example, which illustrated that this synthesis was not only achievable, but was also a modern, desirable form of spirituality.

The dichotomy of the scholastic/rational versus the ritual/mystical was first brought up as a main instrument for both synchronic and diachronic analysis of Tibetan societies by Geoffrey Samuel in his application of the terms *clerical* and *shamanic*. The author equates the *clerical* with the monastic, scholastic and rational, while breaking with the convention of associating the term *shamanic* with the particular practices found among Tungusian peoples. Instead, he defines the phrase as follows:

I use the term 'shamanic' as a general term for a category of practices found in differing degrees in almost all human societies. This category of practices may be briefly described as *the regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience.*⁵³

Further in his book, in the Tibetan context, Samuel associates this "alternate reality" with Tantric deities, accessed through "the alternate states of consciousness of Tantric yoga."⁵⁴ Furthermore, the author describes that shamanic power is gained through meditation in retreat.⁵⁵

If taken literally, the simplistic division into *clerical* and *shamanic* would pose several difficulties, as it does not embrace the full spectrum of Tibetan Buddhist developments. However, I believe this division definitely offers certain analytical possibilities. Therefore, in

⁵³ Samuel 1993: 8. Italics by author.

⁵⁴ Samuel 1993: 8.

⁵⁵ Samuel 1993: 8.

this dissertation I shall generally refer to Tibetan hermitism as *shamanic*, in the strictly Samuelian sense of this term.⁵⁶

Samuel expounds upon the role of the *shamanic* principle in Tibet by quoting Gilles Deleuze and his concept of “nomad thought”/“nomadic science,” by means of which social groups or individuals have continuously endeavored to counteract hierarchical constructs such as state power.⁵⁷ He claims it is only natural that “nomad thought” and the *shamanic* approach would develop in Tibet, due to its ample itinerant communities, especially in regions where the authority of a centralized state could never be completely established.⁵⁸ I shall argue that one of the reasons for which hermitages condense *shamanic* power is because they counteract the political and religious establishments that threaten the identity of those who participate in such hermitages.

Observing the dynamics between the two principles of *clerical-shamanic* within the broad range of Tibetan religious phenomena allows for more understanding of the original adaptation of the Tantric teachings. The constant interaction of the *clerical* and the *shamanic* reveals a great deal about the expansion of the diverse schools on the Tibetan Plateau and sheds a different light on the growth or decline of the different Buddhist schools, lineages and singular rituals, including hermitic practices. What is more, juxtaposing the *clerical* and the *shamanic* could serve as an instrument for revealing the workings of the struggle for power and rivalry for access to resources behind the adaptation of Buddhism in Tibet:

Nomadic science, as Deleuze and Guattari note, is constantly subject to appropriation and transformation by State science. (...) The nomadic science of the *Vajrayāna* was reclaimed by the ‘civilized shamans’ of Tibet as a weapon against the incipient state. At any rate, the *Vajrayāna* came to present to the Tibetans a way of being and a form of social and political activity, capable of flowing around and beyond any kind of hierarchical structure.⁵⁹

Since the ever-changing interrelationship linking these two principles has shaped the face of virtually every religious observance in Tibet, it influenced hermitism as well. Although meditation in retreat as such is more inclined towards the *shamanic*, it has always existed either intertwined with the *clerical* element or side by side with this tendency in a wide range of relations ranging from support, exchange and coexistence to competition or even collision.

⁵⁶ For the critique of the disconnection from the term’s original sense see Gellner 2001: 56-57.

⁵⁷ Deleuze 1985 in Samuel 1993: 373, 572-573.

⁵⁸ Samuel 1993: 373-374.

⁵⁹ Samuel 1993: 572.

As already mentioned, *clerical* forms were more likely to develop in those areas and times on the Tibetan Plateau, when centralized state control flourished, whereas the *shamanic* arose in regions with few centers of localized power or in periods in which no central power existed.

The state-supported activities of the bKa' gdams pa founder Atiśa may have been a fairly good example of the *clerical* option favored by the gTsang pa sovereigns, with the exception of one detail. Atiśa was indeed engaged in performing monastic activities and teaching a Mahāyāna curriculum, but at the same time, he was well educated in the Tantras. Samuel claims that it was this embracement of Tantra that helped monasticism to survive on the plateau even without the assistance of centralized state authority, as it was still supported by the population concerned with utilizing *shamanic* power, which in this way became accessible for the population's benefit:

In this situation it was perhaps inevitable that shamanism would survive by becoming Buddhist, and Buddhist monasticism would survive by becoming shamanic.⁶⁰

After the period during which the gTsang pa rulers still thought of Tantrism as dangerous or heretic, the state-sponsored school of bKa' gdams pa opened the way for Vajrayāna as not only harmless, but also effective in terms of gaining power. Although Tantric power belonged to the category of phenomena that were difficult to control, it had been proven that it could still be used for the sake of the state. Even if unintended, this was when the *shamanic* element became linked with political authority in Tibet for the first time on such a scale. The ancient Eastern Tibetan realm of Nang chen illustrates a similar development, which produced many famous yogins who were also temporal rulers of the region. This is especially interesting since areas of this former kingdom have become the scene for the great revival of hermitic practices analyzed in the case study sections of this dissertation.

II.3. Mi la ras pa and his impact on the development of hermitic lore

Marpa Lo tsā ba (1012-1097) had several disciples who passed on his scholarly lineage (*bshad brgyud*), however, it was his radically *shamanic* pupil who, thanks to his biographical tradition, would become probably the most renowned Tibetan historical figure around the world as well as the pan-Tibetan hermitic prototype.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Samuel 1993: 472.

⁶¹ See Davidson 2005: 261 or E. G. Smith 2001: 60.

Although Mar pa was described as a householder, most of his teachings were higher Tantric arts to be practiced in retreat, so it is only natural that what later developed of his transmission and became known as the bKa' brgyud, was also synonymous with a lineage of hermits and meditators. According to the traditional explanation, the school's yogic inclination is expressed through one of its designations, the dKar brgyud ("White Lineage"), believed by some Tibetan authors to be the only correct term to describe the Tibetan successors of the Indian sage Nā ro pa. Leaving aside the linguistic and historical skepticisms, it is clear that the label "bKa'/dKar brgyud" by its definition emphasizes the *shamanic* aspect of Buddhist practice. Consequently, white became the color of the most advanced Tantric yogins, especially in connection with the proficiency of Inner Heat (*gtum mo*) practice, one of the Nā ro chos drug, which aside from Mahāmudrā, form the core of the bKa' brgyud pa heritage.⁶² The single, white cotton robe as a potent symbol of *shamanic* authority is again utilized by Tibetan hermits today and the complexity of its influence will be discussed extensively in the case study sections below.

The figure of Mi la ras pa the poet-hermit has been the foremost inspiration for Tibetan meditators for centuries. In the context of the living Buddhist tradition, Mi la ras pa (1052-1135) should actually be seen as a far more complex figure than a mere historical personality. Mi la ras pa of Gung thang, or rJe btsun Mi la ras pa, "The Cotton-Clad Lord Mi la," also known as Mi la bzhad pa rdo rje, was an eleventh-century heir of Mar pa's Indian lineages. His influence on the later formation the bKa' brgyud schools has been accounted for in several Tibetan sources.⁶³ Nevertheless, he expresses much more than a historical presence. Due to the impact that the highly popular written and oral versions of his life and teachings have had on generations of practitioners until this very day, Mi la ras pa transcends the role of a lineage patriarch, and becomes the ultimate archetype of the assiduous practitioner, whose efforts are met with an absolute success "within one body and life."⁶⁴

⁶² See E. G. Smith 2001: 40 and Karma stobs rgyal 1999: 4. It is possible that whiteness symbolized the simplicity of the meditator's mind, but later it also came to denote the power of practice lineages. Compare Tarungpa (sic!) Tulku 2009.

⁶³ The most widespread text authored by gTsang smyon He ru ka (1452-1507) accounting for his life and teachings cannot be considered a source of historical information, since, as is often the case with the *rnām thar* genre, the plot itself along with the didactic material dominates over biographical details. See Vostrikov 1994:189. Mi la ras pa's life and work are documented as early as in the 13th century (see rDo rje mdzes 'od 1985). Moreover, we find mentions of Mi la ras pa in the *sDeb ther sngon po* or in *chos 'byung* and *gser phreng* literature which discuss the lives of the masters of the bKa' brgyud schools. Huber (2006) and Quintman (2008) report on the diverse *lam yig* and *gnas yig* scriptures that extol the sites from Mi la's biographic tradition. Also see Roberts 2007.

⁶⁴ For the figure of Mi la ras pa as a Tantric Buddhist saint, see Tiso 1989. Compare Davidson's mention of Mi la ras pa's archetypal role (Davidson 2005: 256).

What is more, one could perceive this historical personality from a more abstract perspective, if one accounts for the transformative role of the transmission lineage in the continuation of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Within this concept, the past is recurrently reanimated as a dynamic force that possesses the power to convert the practitioner's self into the perfection of buddhahood. Consequently, to a Tantric practitioner, Mi la ras pa is considered to be a beyond-personal embodiment of absolute victory over the suffering of *samsāra*, as well as a manifestation of the enlightened principle, whose blessing power (*byin rlabs*) can be evoked regardless of time and place.⁶⁵ Due to this power of omnipresence, he can manifest within charismatic individuals who pass his spiritual legacy on to others. Contemporary Tibetans believe that Mi la ras pa even has the power to take rebirth in the post-Mao reality of Khams. One of such doyens is particularly responsible for the revival of hermitic training in the area of sKyo brag in Eastern Tibet, as the case study chapters will show.

The most popular version of the life story of Mi la ras pa authored by gTsang sMyon He ru ka (1452-1507) draws on the “sinner-becomes-saint” scheme.⁶⁶ The reader learns about the Mi la ras pa's mistreatment in his childhood, his mother's craving for vengeance against their abusive relatives, as well as the misdeeds the young Mi la ras pa carries out in order to punish his malevolent kin and satisfy his mother's obsession with revenge. As he realizes the *karmic* consequences of his behavior, the terrified delinquent sets off to find means that would purge the negative imprints of the transgressions in his mind, the seeds of future suffering. His quest for a suitable instructor leads him to Mar pa, whose harsh treatment of Mi la ras pa so heavily burdened by negativities is meant to cleanse the disciple's *karma*. When Mi la ras pa finally begins his proper Tantric training and is granted the necessary *dbang*, *lung* and *khrid*, he is sent off to practice the teachings in mountain solitude.⁶⁷

From then on, the account of his life would set a powerful paradigm for so many other generations of Tibetan hermits to follow. Seen from the perspective of the concluding section of the narrative, which accounts for Mi la ras pa's complete liberation and enlightenment “in that very body and life” and in spite of his severe *karmic* obscurations, the history becomes the model for the highest accomplishment in Tantric practice not only for the bKa' brgyud pa, but in a

⁶⁵ Even if virtually all founders and early codifiers of schools are invoked as autonomous Tantric deities, complete with *maṇḍala*, *mantra* and *sādhana*, Mi la ras pa remains one of the central inspirations for the practice lineages. For the rituals focusing on Mi la ras pa: see later in this chapter.

⁶⁶ Before gTsang smyon's time, Mi la ras pa's life and songs had existed in oral form as well as in many written versions (compare E. G. Smith 1969: 137). Perhaps the most popular edition of the *mgur* before gTsang smyon was penned by the 3rd Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje. For a reprint of this work see Rang byung rdo rje 2008.

⁶⁷ Lhalungpa, et al. 1985.

general sense, for all schools of Tibetan Buddhism.⁶⁸ Yet the power of Mi la ras pa's example lies precisely in the prospect of identification with his personal path. It is an invitation open to anyone, since what precedes the account of his great victory of supreme awakening are the detailed descriptions of his human weaknesses, transgressions and struggles. For these reasons, even if the *sprul sku* institution was invented much later, Tibetan Buddhist tradition sees Mi la ras pa as the epitome of the *shamanic* "self-made" master, whose ascent in social and religious hierarchy was due to his own effort on the path of meditation practice in austerity.

Mi la ras pa's example certainly inspired other hermits, and his biographical tradition also became accessible to common people through oral accounts, popularizing the yogic lifestyle and helping to create a link between the most advanced Tantric practices trained in strict isolation from society and between that society itself. In this way, the manifestation of Mi la ras pa's life as archetypal illustrates many significant developments within Tibetan hermitism, especially about the dynamics of the relationship between the hermit and society. It seems that in spite of the isolation, various important levels of exchange have been occurring within this relationship and the perception of the figure of Mi la ras pa among lay society is an excellent example that illustrates the nature of this connection.

Geoffrey Samuel developed Melford Spiro's⁶⁹ threefold model of social expectations towards Buddhism and projected it onto the Tantric practices of the Tibetans. Samuel's model is also divided into three types: "the *karma* orientation," "the pragmatic orientation" and "the *bodhi* orientation." The first category includes individuals who are concerned with obtaining a better rebirth through avoiding negative actions (*sdig pa*) and collecting merit (*bsod nams*); the second includes individuals who seek the help of an expert practitioner in order to achieve specific goals, important for health, longevity and prosperity. The "*bodhi* orientation" lies at the heart of every Tantric ritual, animating the practitioner to strive for supreme enlightenment for the good of all.⁷⁰ It is according to these different expectations that one could investigate the role of Mi la ras pa as an exemplary renunciate who has played a vital role in promoting meditation retreat among the Tibetan practitioners of Tantra.

Descriptions of Mi la ras pa's success have certainly encouraged those of the idealistic motivation mentioned above to follow in his footsteps. After all, complete enlightenment along with its impressive by-products, such as supernatural powers, were portrayed as available within one lifetime to anyone who engages in the advanced practices of Tantric

⁶⁸ Lhalungpa, et al. 1985: vii-xxxii. This statement is also proven by my own experience in the field, as I have seen copies of the *Mi la'i rnam mgur* in the huts of hermits of very different sectarian background all across Kham.

⁶⁹ Spiro 1982.

⁷⁰ Samuel 1993: 199-222, 223-244, and 258-269.

yoga. Mi la ras pa's story suggests that anybody who understood the basic Buddhist truths about impermanence or the importance of liberation from suffering could seek out these highly transformative teachings. The urgency of this quest and the encouragement to renounce *samsāra* and tread the spiritual path to liberation and enlightenment was to become paradigmatic for describing the breakthrough of conversion in the later *rnam thar* narratives.

With time, Mi la ras pa's life story also became instrumental to further literary appropriations, composed in the hermitages of La phyi, one of the sites extolled as his favorite venue for retreat. The versions of his biography helped spread the influence of bKa' brgyud schools over other sites mentioned in the *rnam thar*, where the bKa' brgyud pas constructed their hermitages.⁷¹ The case study chapters explore the Eastern Tibetan meditation school named after La phyi, which develops the biographical tradition of Mi la ras pa through the adoption of his ascetic lifestyle in the contemporary landscape of post-Mao Khams.

gTsang sMyon's *Mi la'i rnam mgur* could also serve as a functional means. It could be used as a handbook of how to lead a solitary lifestyle dedicated to meditation or as a practice manual for meditation rituals performed during retreat, since it contains a summary of esoteric instructions and relates the details of their application along with an explanation of experiences arising from them.⁷² Excerpts from the *Mi la'i rnam mgur* could literally be applied as liturgical techniques for use in retreat – for instance, the text of some of the songs has been used as a chant to venerate one's own guru.⁷³

The *rnam thar* as such has developed into one of the hermit's greatest aids on his path of austere practice; the biographical tradition of Mi la ras pa is only one of the many instances, if not one of the most popular ones, of this influential genre. Gene Smith notes on the role of this particular hagiography in maintaining the hermitic practices:

These were works that would continue to inspire the entire Tibetan cultural world down to the present day. [gTsang smyon's] example fostered a whole school of Bka' brgyud pa biographical works. These writings glorified the great Bka' brgyud pa ascetics and yogis who lived and practiced in wilderness retreats and called for an emulation of this way of religious life.⁷⁴

Considering the idealism of “the *bodhi* orientation” and the availability of Tantric instructions, with Mi la ras pa, yogic training undeniably became less costly. According to his biographies, the renunciate did not require material offerings in exchange for precepts as his

⁷¹ Huber 1997 a: 243-4, Quintman 2008.

⁷² For the biographies of Mi la ras pa as sacred scriptures, see Tiso 1989: 221-228.

⁷³ E. G. Smith 2001: 9.

⁷⁴ E. G. Smith 2001: 61.

own guru Mar pa and other teachers of the same period did, after the fashion of Indian gurus. A mendicant yogin, Mi la ras pa did not found religious institutions, which would call for regular donations. Free contributions were possibly not frowned upon, although they were no longer necessary in order to obtain instructions.⁷⁵ Mi la ras pa's disregard for possessions became the hallmark of a yogin free of attachment to wealth or worldly things.

The ideal of high-mindedness, complete detachment and strict yogic self-discipline was to be pursued. The lives of so many subsequent renunciates, such as Lo ras pa dbang phyug brtson 'grus (1187-1250), Zhabs dkar ba tshogs drug rang grol (1781-1851) and more recently Dil mgo⁷⁶ mKhyen brtse bkra shis dpal 'byor (1910-1991) or Karma rang byung kun khyab, better known as Kar lu Rin po che (1905-1989) to name but a few out of a multitude, have demonstrated that Mi la ras pa's spirit continues to inspire Tibetan practitioners.⁷⁷ Also today, as detailed in the case study, the revivalists of the hermitic movement in Khams strongly rely on the figure of Mi la ras pa. However, since hermits themselves have always been few in number, it appears that it is not "the *bodhi* orientation" that has been decisive for the perpetuation of the hermitic lifestyle among Tibetan societies.

Ideally, the hermit should be independent of the realm of the mundane. Practically, for most of their training, hermits are still reliant on their access to resources, so their existence is influenced by their link to the lay community involved in agricultural or pastoral production. Since the religious needs of the non-specialists are mostly driven by the accumulation of merit and the fulfillment of personal goals through tapping sources for magical power stemming mostly from Tantric rituals, it becomes important to examine in what ways the story of Mi la ras pa appeals to those groups, since this will disclose one of the most significant factors behind the continuation of the hermitic practices.⁷⁸

Individuals who operate according to the "*karma* orientation" would be drawn to Mi la ras pa's life story for counsel on how to avoid collecting *sdig pa* and direct oneself toward the accumulation of *bsod nams*, which immediately leads to a meaningful life and better rebirth. This guidance is evident in view of the fact that the account of Mi la ras pa's life does not merely contain sophistications of the *rnam thar* genre, comprehensible only to an educated individual, nor it is to be read solely by religious professionals. It is also a powerful folk tale with a decidedly didactic flavor, meant for everyone. Indeed, the lines of the *Mi la'i rnam*

⁷⁵ Mi la ras pa, et al. 1997: 198.

⁷⁶ More spelling variants are possible for this name.

⁷⁷ See Bradburn 1995, Zhabs dkar, et al. 2001, Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008, Karma rang byung kun khyab, et al. 1985.

⁷⁸ Samuel 1993: 199-223, 258-269.

mgur have been chanted and sung by wandering story-tellers all across the plateau to remind the people of bad deeds that lead to a reincarnation in one of the lower realms of existence and of the good or “white” (*dkar*) ones, which lead to a rebirth in higher existences, or at least, to favorable conditions in the human realm.⁷⁹

The message becomes more pronounced if its articulation reflects the conditioning of the recipient. The language of the narrative in *Mi la ras pa'i rnam mgur* is a skillful mode of expression, by means of which the figure of *Mi la ras pa* powerfully re-connects the obscure world of the hermit with the pragmatism of lay society. The phrasing of the text is straightforward and conversational, depicting not only the hermit's special powers and spiritual victories, but also the ordeals of his quest to receive religious instruction and the austerities he experienced while practicing them. Furthermore, the text even reports on everyday tasks expressed with an appreciation of various colloquialisms.⁸⁰

As to the presentation of the figure of *Mi la ras pa* himself, his power of persuasion, attracting new disciples, convincing donors or taming foes lay in his voice and in the aptness of his teachings, communicated according to the needs of his audience. *Mi la ras pa* came to be known for his great poetic gift. The vocabulary of the *mgur*, or spiritual songs attributed to him, is often conveniently simple, close to vernacular speech. Their sincerity, spontaneity and vivid imagery makes them appealing to the common person, even if they articulate very precise meditation technologies, placed contextually in one of Tibet's most sophisticated mystical lineages. For instance, this particular song skillfully conceals the specialist jargon of meditation training in the Mahāmudra tradition by means of natural imagery:

Listen, [my] happy girl-disciple dPal dar 'bum,

[Not only] wealthy, [but also] endowed with trust!

If meditating on the sky makes you happy,

[Why feel disturbed by] southern clouds – they are [mere] apparitions of the sky.

Rest in the natural essence of the sky.

If meditating on the sun and moon makes you happy,

[Why feel disturbed by] planets and stars – they are [mere] apparitions of the sun and moon.

Rest in the natural essence of the sun and moon.

⁷⁹ Lhalungpa, et al. 1985: vii.

⁸⁰ See for instance a passage on daily chores: Lhalungpa, et al. 1985: 47 and Rus pa'i rgyan can 2008: 59.

If meditating on the mountain makes you happy,

[Why feel disturbed by] trees – they are [mere] apparitions of the mountain.

Rest in the natural essence of the mountain.

If meditating on the ocean makes you happy,

[Why feel disturbed by] waves – they are [mere] apparitions of the ocean.

Rest in the natural essence of the ocean.

If meditating on [your] own mind makes you happy,

[Why feel disturbed by] discursive thoughts – they are [mere] apparitions of the mind.

Rest in the natural essence of mind itself.⁸¹

Simplicity of expression as well as the evocative similes of nature present in the *mgur* unite the opposing lifestyles of the ordinary folk and the yogin, connecting the untamed mind with the discipline of the highly trained Tantric specialist and bringing together the pragmatic or merit-driven lay society with the practitioner striving to attain buddhahood.⁸² That ability to mediate between different worlds and reconcile extremes assisted in coining the archetype of the benevolent hermit, which still functions in Tibetan societies today and helps to perpetuate the hermitic practices.

Mi la ras pa's abundant miracles and demonstrations of his supernatural skills, which point to his power as an accomplished practitioner, as portrayed by gTsang smyon, also captured the imagination of common people. As Snellgrove puts it:

[...] there has usually been a very close connection, at least in literary sources, between the free-practising man of religion (yogin or hermit) and tales of magic and imagination. Ordinary people believed in demons and monsters, and who else should be able to quell them, if not the sage who meditates serene and unharmed in wild remote places? The yogins and hermits themselves, while doubtless believing too (in a sense) in demons and monsters, regarded them as unreal like all other phenomenal manifestations, for they had grasped philosophical theories which lay beyond the understanding of ordinary worldly people, and which they express as an ineffable mystery.⁸³

⁸¹ *yang ke nya ma dpal dar 'bum/nyon dang phyug mo dad can ma/ nam mkha' bsgom du bde lags na/ lho sprin nam mkha'i cho 'phrul yin/ nam mkha' rang gi ngang du zhog/nyi zla bsgom du bde lags na/ gza' skar nyi zla'i cho 'phrul yin/nyi zla rang gi ngang du zhog/ ri bo bsgom du bde lags na// rtsi shing ri bo'i cho 'phrul yin/ ri bo rang gi ngang du zhog/ rgya mtsho bsgom du bde lags na/ rba rlab rgya mtsho'i cho 'phrul yin/ rgya mtsho rang gi ngang du zhog/ rang sems bsgom du bde lags na/ rnam rtog sems kyi cho 'phrul yin// sems nyid rang gi ngang du zhog/ (Rus pa'i rgyan can 2008: 306).*

⁸² For the discussion of Mi la ras pa's biographical tradition highlighting the lyrical and epic qualities of the narrative, see Tiso 1989: 218-228.

⁸³ Snellgrove & Richardson 1995: 105-106.

Since Mi la ras pa was said to have displayed his magic skills in order to tame harmful energies of the locality, by listening to the re-told tale of his life, lay people could come to suppose that Tantric practice in solitude was an effective means to accumulate *shamanic* powers that could benefit the whole population of the area. Moreover, the narrative suggests the accessibility of the source of that power. The great legend of Mi la ras pa's life describes him as something of a "people's saint."⁸⁴ Although he was an enlightened master who lived in remote caves high up in the mountains, he came down to villages along with his disciples to beg for food, demonstrate his skills and to attract new followers with his example and simple, but resonant language. This availability was vital, since in Tibet, throughout and after Mi la ras pa's time, there has been a great demand on Tantric specialists, both when people wished to receive religious instruction and in cases when those professionals were needed in the position of effective carriers of transformative power expected to create a positive influence in people's lives as well as experts for Vajrayāna rituals, which, according to Samuel

[...] provide the magical technology through which the people of Tibet attempt to exert control over the circumstances of their lives and deaths.⁸⁵

The benefits of befriending hermits were therefore apparent, which in turn called for their support. The local community sustained their ritual experts by providing them with resources required for the long periods of isolation in the mountains. At least from Mi la ras pa's time until today, it has been customary anywhere in the Tibetan world to either occasionally give alms to a begging hermit or to engage in longer-term donorship. This has been vital for the existence of hermits since, like in the case of Mi la ras pa, they were not always associated with a monastery, which would organize provisions for them; ideally, they would even disassociate themselves from the monastery. As vegetation in high altitude is scarce, hunting condemned as an anti-Buddhist activity that promotes the amassing of *sdig pa* through the taking of lives, and the time spent on endeavors to find food should preferably be devoted to meditation, it is not exorbitant to claim that hermitic practice on the plateau relied largely on the connection to lay society and local economy – i.e. on the very world from which the hermit attempts to escape. The idea of the local hermit as an embodiment of Mi la ras pa and at the same time a "people's saint" is being revived in today's Khams, as the case study will show.

⁸⁴ For the usage of the term "saint" in relation to Mi la ras pa, compare Tiso 1989.

⁸⁵ Samuel 1993: 258, 289.

The hermit-villager link is believed to be mutually beneficial. The benefactor profits significantly from supporting an accessible source of spiritual power by collecting merit, which was mentioned as one of the foremost motivational factors among lay Buddhists in Tibetan societies. The link between hermits and their surroundings, based upon the mutual exchange of resources and ritual service is still valid, even if the social function of hermitages also usually differs from that of monasteries.

The folk-oriented aspects of the message contained in Mi la ras pa's songs contrast with their more elaborate feature: the form of his *mgur* bears a close resemblance to the Indian *dohā*, "vajra songs" of mystic experience also reported to have been used by Mi la ras pa's teacher, Mar pa. It seems that the lyrical works attributed to Mi la ras pa were able to bridge one more pair of opposites: that of the Indian Buddhist tradition retransmitted into Tibet and the indigenous modes of its expression.⁸⁶ The medium of the "vajra song" would from then on become a convenient method for Tibetan hermits to recount their direct experiences with the most advanced segments of Buddhist philosophy and practice. For these reasons, the "vajra song" has become another tool among the whole plethora of skillful means (*upāyakauśalya*) through which Tantric masters instruct their students on the most subtle and intricate states of mind. These experiences (*nyams*) are intimately private and yet non-personal, since they pertain to the awareness of the absolute.⁸⁷ Perhaps for this reconciliation of philosophical-empirical paradoxes, the *mgur* became the natural language of the accomplished meditator. Also today, the Tibetan adaptations of the *dohās* are composed in hermitages across the plateau and the original songs of Mi la ras pa are cited during Tantric ceremonies in order to bring about spiritual maturity in the adepts.⁸⁸

All things considered, Mi la ras pa's biographic lore with its popular reach became vital in popularizing the paradigm of the Tibetan hermit as a master of paradox, capable of uniting irreconcilable extremes.⁸⁹ The modern adaptation of this social and religious competence will be discussed in the case study sections of this work.

⁸⁶ For the association of *mgur* with the *dohā* and the Indian tradition, see for instance Thupten Jinpa & Eisner 2000: 7 or R. Jackson 1996: 374. For Mar pa's expression of the *dohās*, see gTsang smyon He ru ka, et. al 1986.

⁸⁷ Compare Thupten Jinpa & Eisner 2000: 12, 16.

⁸⁸ Such ceremonies include "empowerments" or *dbang skur*, as I witnessed in August 1998 in Graz, Austria during the *tshig dbang* phase of a *dbang skur* performed for a community of Western Buddhists by a Bhutanese 'Brugs pa bKa' brgyud pa lama, sLob dpon Tshe bcu Rin po che (1918-2003). For the current popularity of *mgur* composition see R. Jackson 1996: 373.

⁸⁹ On the life of Mi la ras pa as a saint, embodiment of the Buddha and epic hero, see Tiso 1989.

II.4. Mi la ras pa and early Buddhist pioneers as inspiration for 19th century Khams pa renaissance

It seems that several aspects of Mi la ras pa's legend become particularly relevant in times of cultural rebirth. Due to his complete independence from religious structures, the direct, down-to-earth style of his message, the self-imposed effort, one-pointedly focused on attaining the sublime goal of Tantric practice, his example seems to have provided a convincing source of inspiration during the non-sectarian renaissance of 19th century Khams as well as in modern times of cultural revival in these areas.⁹⁰ The subsequent chapter is devoted entirely to the activity of the Ris med movement, its domination of the Eastern Tibetan religious scene and codification of the Khams pa hermitic tradition; this section is merely a presentation of the trends embodied in Mi la ras pa and similar figures, which stimulated the 19th century restoration and reform of practice lineages.

The figure of Mi la ras pa was frequently recalled during the Ris med period in an utterly literal manner. For instance, Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899), who actually took pride in being a descendant from the clan of the great poet-yogin, was keen on evoking the pioneer spirit of the bKa' brgyud lineages by composing hymns (*bstod pa*) or liturgical pieces to the three founding fathers of the bKa' brgyud (i.e. Mar pa, Mi la ras pa and sGam po pa).⁹¹ However, he seems to have focused primarily on Mi la ras pa and authored a number of texts, in which the ritual was centered around the famous renunciate as a perfectly awakened enlightened being, including an elaborate liturgy along with a specific invocatory mantra and a *maṇḍala* of supporting deities and protectors. The various supplication rituals penned by Kong sprul include the poetic lines of praise,⁹² but most importantly, a *guru-sādhana*⁹³ and a special offering ritual called the *Mi la bla sgrub*,⁹⁴ as well as the *Mi la dbang skur*.⁹⁵ These liturgies are in fact again transmitted and practiced in the bKa' brgyud pa monasteries and retreat centers today and contribute to the religious revival taking place in Eastern Tibet.

Kong sprul's writings also reveal that he believed that the existence and qualities of his hermitage at Tsā 'dra rin chen brag, the main venue of his intellectual, artistic and meditative

⁹⁰ An analysis of the modern-day revival is provided later in this work.

⁹¹ Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 7.

⁹² Kong sprul 1998: 120-125.

⁹³ Kong sprul 1997 b: 269-299.

⁹⁴ Kong sprul 1976 b, 1: fols. 471-486. For the *Mi la bla sgrub* see Kong sprul 1997 a: 269-281. Schuh additionally mentions a hymn dedicated to Mi la ras pa (no title mentioned) composed in 1858 during a journey through Central Tibet. See Schuh 1976: 9, 189.

⁹⁵ Kong sprul 1976 a, 1: fols. 487 – 506.

achievements, was prophesized in a speech addressed to Mi la ras pa by his guru Mar pa.⁹⁶ Perhaps for this reason, Kong sprul propagated and instigated the three-year group meditation curriculum at Tsā 'dra, marked with a yearly event commemorating the great renunciate and initiated in 1862, during the second year of his first retreat. The ritual involves donning a white, wet cotton robe, invoking Mi la ras pa and performing *gtum mo* practice while walking out of the retreat enclosure in a procession. The cloth is to be dried by force of one's skill in meditation before an audience of local villagers. Such display of yogic prowess by retreatants is again carried out in the bKa' brgyud hermitages of Eastern Tibet nowadays.⁹⁷

The focus on Mi la ras pa as a Tantric deity and lineage founder stemmed from the need to rekindle the spirit of genuine practice, a goal of many 19th-century non-sectarian teachers. The "self-discipline of the yogic path" as Samuel expresses it, was an important element of the Ris med approach.⁹⁸ In the second half of the 19th century in Eastern Tibet there was apparently more interest in establishing hermitages than monasteries. Doctrines that provided the practitioner with more independence, such as the rDzogs pa chen po, were becoming increasingly popular, and generally speaking, the renaissance participants favored an experiential, direct approach to the application of Buddhist precepts, because it emphasized a certain authenticity required in any process of renewal.

As for the more understated levels of inspiration provided by the activity of Mi la ras pa, his pioneer spirit may be one of the stimuli behind the more folk-oriented style of composition repeatedly adopted by Ris med activists. For instance, rDza dPal sprul (1808-1887) often adopted a straightforward language in his writings, among which the popular rDzog chen primer named *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* plays an important role.⁹⁹ Even if dPal sprul was hailed as a rebirth of the renowned rNying ma pa visionary 'Jigs med gling pa (1729-1798), his lifestyle was definitely more oriented toward the example of Mi la ras pa. He was known to have lead a life characterized by absolute minimalism, disguised as a wandering beggar. In a typical, yogic, carefree manner, he did not accept offerings and regularly refused to act according to the protocol demands at monasteries and *sngags pa* practice centers. He was said

⁹⁶ As cited in the catalogue of Kong sprul's *gsung 'bum* in Schuh 1976: 234.

⁹⁷ See Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 57.

⁹⁸ Samuel 1993: 535-536.

⁹⁹ O rgyan 'jigs med 1998. In English rendering: O rgyan 'jigs med, et al. 1994.

to quote Mi la ras pa a great deal and to have sent quite a few of his students to “give up all involvements and live like Milarepa.”¹⁰⁰

Undeniably, the independent spirit of the great hermit perfectly fits into the 19th-century, Eastern Tibetan, non-dGe lugs pa intellectual and religious milieu. After all, Mi la ras pa’s activities took place beyond the established venues of Buddhist practice, such as monasteries or even lay courts of prominent teachers of the era, where the continuation of Tantric transmission was ensured, like that of Mi la ras pa’s own master Mar pa Lo tsā ba.

As the first one to continue a lineage indigenized by his guru, Mi la ras pa could be perceived as the father of pan-Tibetan hermitism, at least as far as the rituals that developed among the gSar ma schools are concerned. The 11th century was a time of relatively independent quests, when practitioners strived to find the most genuine and effective precepts and gurus. This quest for authenticity was again something with which the Ris med activists could identify. A genuineness that might have to be confirmed by Indian standards was desired, but this genuineness would also need to be conform to the native context. The non-sectarian movement of Eastern Tibet was very keen on emphasizing its uniqueness, identified with local histories and took pride in the entire indigenous Buddhist culture that grew in Tibet from the 8th century. Although they did possess a purist inclination to restore the spirit of unadulterated practice according to original Indian scriptures, which became apparent mostly through the reform of scholarship, the Ris med masters were not content with being mere propagators of Indic lore.¹⁰¹ That was the reason they did not only favor Mi la ras pa, but also other codifiers and founding fathers of the native lineages. Even the great popularity of the gTer movement was to a large extent a celebration of the indigenous Buddhist legacy.¹⁰² The Gling Ge sar cult, reinstalled by ’Ju Mi pham (1846-1912) was doubtlessly connected with the chthonic “religion of people” (*mi chos*), as well as with the local practices of Khams.¹⁰³

Looking back on the times of coining Tibetan culture also appealed to the Ris med teachers possibly because it recalled the era when sectarian divisions were not fully pronounced yet. In spite of all the rivalry between the old and new scriptural authorities, their translations and representatives, and the contests for authenticity and competition for benefactors, the period between the 10th and 11th centuries had in the indigenous historiography been considered the

¹⁰⁰ On dPal sprul’s life see O rgyan ’jigs med, et al. 1994: xxi-xxv. Besides: Rheingans (n.d.): 27-28, Samuel 1993: 355, 539. On dPal sprul as an emanation of ’Jigs med gling pa: O rgyan ’jigs med, et al. 1994: 420. Numerous anecdotes on dPal sprul’s life also in Das 1992; as well as in Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 51, 67-69, 83-85, 254-258.

¹⁰¹ Rheingans (n.d.): 5, 23-24, 26. E. G. Smith 2001: 232.

¹⁰² See later in the current chapter.

¹⁰³ Rheingans (n.d): 27-28.

grand era of revitalization, a new great opportunity for Buddhist teachings to regain influence and flourish after a time of suppression. Furthermore, and most importantly for Kong sprul and his colleagues, practitioners did not define their religious identity via a certain school. In the 10th-11th centuries, Buddhist schools (*chos lugs*) were still in the process of formation. It was only later that they came to be known for their established textual corpus and rituals, developed at monasteries through the system of succession of reincarnated masters (*sprul sku*), supported by their own economy and political connections. It is not surprising that descriptions of the open atmosphere of the pioneer Phyi dar era, undivided by sectarianism and driven by a missionary goal, which set a frame around Mi la ras pa's activities, naturally became a point of interest for lamas engaged in the Eastern Tibetan revival of the 19th century.¹⁰⁴

But perhaps the most convincing way of honoring the native Buddhist heritage in Tibet was through the employment of sacred geography. The Khams pa masters of the 19th century authored or popularized countless texts which described the sanctity of the landscape in the different regions of dBus gTsang and mDo Khams and its significance for the Tantric practitioner.¹⁰⁵ One such scripture is a brief, but noteworthy text of the pilgrimage guide genre (*gnas yig*), authored by 'Jam dbyang mKhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892).¹⁰⁶ The publication directs the reader through a landscape, whose ritual significance is justified by a link with the origins of Buddhism in Tibet during the imperial era as well as with the subsequent period of dissemination, i.e. the initial times of creation of Tibetan Buddhist mythology and its culture heroes.¹⁰⁷ It is striking that the text recalls them all by means of reference to their caves (*sgrub phug*) as dwelling, activity and practice sites. By presenting these figures against such a yogic, hermitic backdrop mKhyen brtse restores the early cult of translators in a new context, where the meditative, Tantric proficiency of the scholars is stressed. It is no coincidence, for this particular type of synthesis of the *clerical* and the *shamanic*, which later become known by the designation of the "scholar-yogin" (*mkhas sgrub*) became a popular ideal among the 19th-century lamas. 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse dbang po himself, 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Chos kyi blo gros or 'Ju Mi pham, to name only a few, spent just as much time at their hermitages in meditation retreat and by performing Tantric

¹⁰⁴ One should note the competition between Mi la ras pa and some Bon po masters, such as Na ro Bon chung. See Mi la ras pa, et al. 1996: 210-218.

¹⁰⁵ For examples of such writings see the following chapter of this work.

¹⁰⁶ *dBus gtsang gi gnas rten rags rim gyi mtshan byang mdor bsdus dad pa'i sa bon* published in an annotated version with a translation, commentary, footnotes and addenda in Ferrari 1958.

¹⁰⁷ Ferrari 1958: 42-46, 51, 54-55, 57 and elsewhere in that text. Compare Samuel 1993: 19.

ceremonies as they did on studying and expounding upon the five traditional sciences or composing commentaries.¹⁰⁸

The landscape described in the aforementioned *gnas yig* reflects the scenery of the original time of cultural codification. Such longing for the past as an era of former grandeur, for the period of coining Tibetan culture in general and for the emergence of the Buddhist mythos in particular resulted in the promotion of the value of the native civilization. It was a new way to validate doctrinal and cultural authenticity and to reconstruct a multitude of hermitic role models to be followed by generations to come. The composition of this text was only one example among many activities of the Ris med masters, who themselves became codifiers of tradition for future hermits, which will be explained in the subsequent chapters.

II.5. The impact of sGam po pa and his followers: towards a “clericalization” of retreat practice

According to bKa’ brgyud historians, among the countless disciples of Mi la ras pa who mostly followed his hermitic lifestyle, the great poet-renunciate had two main successors. His “moon-like” student was the adventurous Ras chung rdor rje grags pa (1085-1161), who continued his master’s lineage in a less formalized manner than the other, “sun-like” pupil.¹⁰⁹ The latter designation is attributed to the physician-monk sGam po pa bSod nams rin chen (1079-1153), also referred to as the *Dwags po lha rje* or “The Physician of Dwags po,” who played a major role in institutionalizing the strongly meditative bKa’ brgyud pa lineages and thus, effectively associated retreat practice with monastic life. sGam po pa began his religious career as a bKa’ gdams pa monk. Later, he sought out Mi la ras pa and began intensive meditation training in retreat.¹¹⁰ His practice was ultimately successful as confirmed by his master: thus, he was granted with the succession of his guru’s authority to represent his lineage.

This is where sGam po pa’s account becomes a fairly suitable example of another paradox resolved in the course of hermitic training. According to traditional explanations and social expectations, by way of practice in isolation, hermits finally come to recognize the ultimate

¹⁰⁸ See the following chapter.

¹⁰⁹ Ras chung pa was supposed to have been the more *shamanic* disciple of Mi la ras pa, who did not establish an institution or school, but gave rise to a lineage known as the *Ras chung snyan brgyud*, which he himself brought down from India. After the 16th century these precepts permeated other bKa’ brgyud pa schools and their distinct identity was lost. See E. G. Smith 2001: 42 and Thrangu Rinpoche, et al. 2001. For a critical analysis of the biographical sources concerning Ras chung pa and Mi la ras pa, see Roberts 2007.

¹¹⁰ For the life story of sGam po pa, see Roerich 1976, 2: 420, 435, 521-522, 558-559. Also see Mi bskyod rdo rje 2004. In Western languages – see Stewart 2004 for a compilation of Tibetan sources. Other Western sources: Trungpa 1999, Jampa Thaye 1990. A critical study of sGam po pa’s life and teaching styles is contained in Trungram Gyaltrul (2004).

nature of reality. When they reach the goal, it is assumed that they perform activity, attracting and serving many disciples, as sGam po pa did in compliance with the prophesy of his “root teacher” (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*). The involvement of *bodhicitta* already emphasized in the bKa' gdams pa teaching ensures that success by no means remains a personal victory. At first, hermits isolate themselves from any contact with the outside world, choosing seclusion to aid the process of spiritual maturation or even to accelerate it and paradoxically, exactly for the purpose of benefitting the ones they isolate themselves from. Therefore, enlightened hermits seek to reestablish themselves in society through inspiring disciples in order to impart their experience on others.¹¹¹

Through his extreme lifestyle and aversion to community life, Mi la ras pa operated on a relatively small scale and did not aspire to establish an organization meant for upholding his instructions. In contrast to this, sGam po pa was quite aware of the benefits that appear from monasticism and institutionalization, even if the highly Tantric content of the bKa' brgyud pa teachings called for individual efforts in retreat rather than for a life in a collective. However, before he encountered his yogic and *shamanic* master, sGam po pa had been a monk himself. In the course of his career, he came to understand that centralizing authority was not only convenient for ensuring continuation of the lineage, but also for gaining access to financial means and other resources. Thus, progressively, the early bKa' brgyud pa hermitages developed into monastic bodies. Gene Smith observes:

The emphasis on oral transmission, individual solitary contemplation, and intensely personal bonds between guru and disciple mitigated against the formation of a unified Bka' brgyud pa sect. The very nature of the Bka' brgyud pa teachings promoted constant fission. Gradually, however, noted gurus attracted large numbers of followers and disciples to their isolated hermitages, and thus Bka' brgyud pa monasteries came to exist.¹¹²

In consequence, the same features of the bKa' brgyud lineages that prevented them against developing a “corporate identity” – the *shamanic* call for contemplation in solitude and the individual adequacy of the guru-disciple connection – became the very decisive factors in the foundation of their monastic organizations. That again seems to be an instance of the manifold paradoxes performed and resolved by Tibetan hermitism.

While emic literature typically emphasizes sGam po pa's meditation training as well as his Tantric skills, if one accounts for his establishment of the first bKa' brgyud pa monasteries along with their ritual syllabus, the focus on upholding the Vinaya as well as the systematic

¹¹¹ This process will be explained in detail in Chapter Ten.

¹¹² E. G. Smith 2001: 60.

and gradual approach to the application of Vajrayāna precepts, as observed in the *Dwags po thar rgyan*, it is clear that to a large extent, sGam po pa's legacy involves the creation of a great deal of structure. However, it is not only through their insistence on a theoretical compromise between Sūtra and Tantra that sGam po pa and his influential followers managed to institutionalize the highly private pursuit of enlightenment performed in seclusion. Around 1120, sGam po pa founded Dwags lha sGam po, the very first bKa' brgyud pa monastery, situated in Central Tibet.¹¹³ sGam po pa's disciples followed his example and also founded monastic institutions, which over the course of time became as popular as the yogic lineages. Moreover, because the members of the newly founded *dgon pa*¹¹⁴ would continue to emphasize the meaning of meditation in retreat both through teaching and their own example, the developing bKa' brgyud pa monasticism "provided a context in which the *clerical* and Tantric synthesis could develop further."¹¹⁵

Mi la ras pa's "sun-like" successor sGam po pa "clericalized" bKa' brgyud pa hermitism, along with the entire content and the form of its practice. In this way, the Tantric culture of meditation in seclusion first came down from remote caves and solitary huts and entered monasteries. As a result of this new fusion, hermitism became a part of the monastic curriculum. With sGam po pa, even the very substance of the bKa' brgyud pa doctrine underwent a fundamental change. The Tantric aspect of Mahāmudrā and the *Nā ro chos drug* was combined with the general Sūtric foundation in Buddhist theory, discipline and ethics, all in the typical bKa' gdams pa style of gradual preparation for the application of the profoundly transformative Vajrayāna techniques.¹¹⁶ Retreat centers, located typically high above the monastery grounds and sustained by the home institution with doctrines, curricula, instructors and resources, from then on became a natural part of the monastic landscape. Specific historical instances of this "clericalization" both in the 19th century and today are examined in the subsequent chapters along with the question how the institutionalized, systematic aspects of hermitism were employed to support the different waves of socio-religious revival in Khams.

¹¹³ This institution and in particular, its adjacent hermitage, was revived in the 1980's and will be mentioned in further chapters of this work as the primal venue for retreat training of the main protagonist of the case study.

¹¹⁴ It would be interesting to analyze the semantic evolution of the word *dgon pa*, which has come to denote "monastery," whereas the two original indications of *dgon* are "1. a solitary place, desert, wilderness. 2. hermitage." Jaeschke 1995: 87. Unfortunately, this undertaking would exceed the scope of the present research.

¹¹⁵ Samuel 1993: 477.

¹¹⁶ For sGam po pa's contribution to the content of the bKa' brgyud pa training, see his most renowned work, a compilation of his complete teachings: sGam po pa 1998. This publication is also available in Western languages, consider for instance sGam po pa, et al. 1986.

III. Codifying hermitic tradition: the Ris med renaissance in 19th century Khams

III.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I would like to devote some attention to the great non-sectarian reinvigoration of Buddhist practice and thought, generated through the movement generally known as Ris med, active in Eastern Tibet from the 19th century until the 1950's. This period is particularly important in that it introduced trends, which had a lasting impact on the philosophy and practice of the Khams pa *sgrub brgyud*, notably in the sDe dge kingdom, but also in the adjacent realm of Nang chen, which had been one of its cultural satellites.

Since the era of its founders Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse and mChog gling, the Ris med-related doctrines, practices, texts, cooperation networks and hermitages were perpetrated continually through the series of their synchronic and diachronic reincarnations and disciples. Furthermore, since these conventions were preserved in a roughly unchanged form until the 1950's, they came to denote the *status quo* on the Khams pa religious scene.¹¹⁷ Consequently, since the communist Chinese erased the old socio-cultural make-up, to many Eastern Tibetan religious specialists, the Ris med developments came to represent the lost ritual culture of the past.

This tradition is actively remembered and reenacted today. The revivalists in today's Eastern Tibetan hermitages often present themselves as heirs of the 19th-century renaissance, and as such consciously appropriate the rhetoric, stratagems, and authority of the Ris med movement to suit their purposes. More than this, especially in the 1980's, the schooling of the original revivalists strongly relied on the direct Ris med heirs, who had not gone into exile, survived the Cultural Revolution and were able to provide the new generation with a wide selection of oral transmissions from different religious schools and lineages practiced in Khams prior to 1950.

Therefore, as the present chapter outlines the background, structure and the most important traits of the religious landscape from the second half of the 19th century in Eastern Tibet, it will also depict the historical setting for the field research material presented later.

¹¹⁷ Compare Samuel 1993: 344- 355 and Aris 1977: 206. Several Khams pa lamas also support this argument: see Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008.

III.1.1. sDe dge and its role in the origination of 19th-century Khams pa renaissance

Generally speaking, the lack of a centralized authority prevalent in the many political entities of Eastern Tibet prompted the predilection for *shamanic* trends in Buddhist philosophy and practice over the *clerical* ones. It assisted in the establishment of the practice lineages as in the case of the prevailing bKa' brgyud pa presence at Nang chen and important Sa skya pa or rNying ma pa institutions in sDe dge area. At the same time, the vibrant array of cultural diversities, the pluralistic political autonomies and the development of trade added up to a certain economic surplus and an atmosphere of great intellectual liberty, which reached its pinnacle in the cultural and religious renaissance of the 19th century.

The largest and one of the most densely inhabited polities of Khams was sDe dge. Its capital was a significant point on the tea route between Sichuan and Tibet.¹¹⁸ During the reign of the 44th sovereign of sDe dge, bsTan pa tshe ring (1678-1739), the kingdom was at the peak of its cultural influence. A significant sign of this was the founding of the famous printing press (*par khang*) in 1729, which produced the majority of all volumes published in the Tibetan language, covering topics of all forms of religious and secular culture. The dialect of sDe dge was considered the *lingua franca* for all of Khams, and what is more, a specific local style of script was formulated. On top of that, the excellence of handicrafts of that region became proverbial. All of these factors attracted numerous pilgrims, scholars, monks and traders, who further contributed to the artistic, intellectual and religious effervescence of the region.¹¹⁹

By the 19th century, the favorable economic situation in sDe dge and in other Khams pa polities created possibilities of funding Buddhist projects by local rulers and more importantly, private persons. Even if the organization of economy in Khams was much less formal than in Central Tibet, the dense population secured the steady flow of labor force and in consequence, supported the economic stability in the region. Much more than this, Eastern Tibetans profited greatly from exporting exotic highland goods such as musk, deer antlers and curative plants, but also animal skins, wool, and gold dust to neighboring China. Especially from the 18th century, and later in the 19th century when Europeans colonized Burma and Vietnam, the rapid development of trans-Asian trade networks opened new prospects to link with Chinese and further international markets. Khams pa merchants moved across and

¹¹⁸ Relyea 2010: 124.

¹¹⁹ Hartley 1997: 8.

beyond border areas and benefitted greatly from the demand on costly local products, particularly those procured as medicinal substances in Sichuan and further in China.¹²⁰

Thus, the intensification of trading in valuables resulted in a local buildup of wealth, which when distributed among secular and religious rulers and trading clans, was ready to be spent on subsidizing local religious enterprises.

III.1.2. Religious tolerance and power structures at sDe dge

Prior to the 19th century, sDe dge had maintained its autonomous status for a thousand years. It was governed by a complex network of power, presided over by the king (*rgyal po*), his ministers and prominent members of the clergy. However, it was by no means a rigid structure or a centralized system. The king was in charge of an intricate hierarchy of thirty hereditary chieftains (*sde pa*) who headed twenty-five districts and were practically semi-independent as administrators.¹²¹ Lower in rank were minor officials and leaders of local communities. All of these secular power holders, including the monarch, sought to establish their ties with influential monasteries in order to support their authority on different levels.¹²²

The ruling House of sDe dge (*sde dge tshang*) had accepted the Sa skya school as their official religious affiliation already in the 13th century.¹²³ However, in the 19th century, the kingdom became a stage for a broad intersectorian dialogue, in which prominent teachers of the Sa skya school played an important role.

The development of the non-sectarian tendency might have been motivated by the dramatic tensions and warfare that resulted from religious sectarianism. In 1798, sDe dge became the center of dissension that was rooted in religious prejudice. That very year, as a consequence of the royal patronage of the rNying ma pa school, a civil war broke out in the kingdom, which resulted in suppression of that school by the dominant Sa skya adherents.¹²⁴ 1848 was the year that saw another strife between a dGe lugs pa monastery in Ba thang and a Karma bKa' brgyud pa institution affiliated with the great sDe dge monastery of dPal spungs; as a result, a high lama was slain.¹²⁵

In 1862, a major conflict that spread throughout Khams, struck sDe dge, heavily affecting the local balance of power. It had begun when one of the rulers of Nyag rong, a territory

¹²⁰ Coales 1919, Giersch 2010 and Relyea 2010: 60 and 81.

¹²¹ Yudru Tsomu 2006: 37. For a detailed discussion of sDe dge, especially in the context of the 19th-century tendencies for political, religious and intellectual unity, see Hartley 1997.

¹²² Hartley 1997: 87-89.

¹²³ Hartley 1997: 7-8.

¹²⁴ E. G. Smith 1970: 24.

¹²⁵ E. G. Smith 1970: 248.

neighboring sDe dge in the south-west, mGon po nam rgyal (?-1865) developed the ambition to bring the whole of Eastern Tibet under his command.¹²⁶ The chieftains of sDe dge sought to appeal for aid to both Lha sa and Beijing, but since the Manchus were not able to take immediate action, the dGa' ldan pho brang regime seized the opportunity to increase their influence in Khams. Hence, in 1865 Lha sa provided an army, which ultimately defeated the Nyag rong forces and ended the war.¹²⁷

In the wake of the hostilities, the dGe lugs pa augmented their authority in sDe dge. Two dGe lugs pa monasteries insisted that one of the most famous and politically influential bKa' brgyud pa monasteries of dPal spungs in sDe dge be destroyed and *de facto* "converted" into a dGe lugs pa institution.¹²⁸ Several rNying ma pa-associated institutions and individuals were persecuted on the suspicion of conspiring with mGon po nam rgyal.¹²⁹

Furthermore, a certain "scholastic conquest" also occurred, as philosophical views approved by the dGe lugs pa were spread in the role of the only acceptable doctrine. Equally problematic was that the specific teaching, studying and debating techniques employed in the monastic colleges of the dGe lugs pa were used to create sectarian dissent, adding to what Smith calls "an intellectual petrification."¹³⁰

As the dGe lugs pa influence in sDe dge and in the whole of Khams increased, the desire for intellectual and religious liberty became more pronounced. In fact, the kingdom had already developed an inclination towards tolerance, dating from the 18th-century sectarian conflict involving the sDe dge court. At that time, the regent queen was imprisoned and exiled due to her sympathies for the renowned rNying ma pa master 'Jigs med gling pa (1729-1798) by the dominant Ngor pa sect. In the aftermath of the conflict, the queen's son and successor to the sDe dge throne, Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin (1786- ?) later composed what Smith refers to as "the first document of the nonsectarian movement."¹³¹ The famous *sDe dge'i rgyal rabs* reaffirmed that the guiding principle in the relationship between royalty and clergy in the realm should be built on the acceptance of and support for all schools.¹³² Thus, the practice of patronage of the *dBu bla khag lnga* ("Five Chaplains") was initiated. Later, in the

¹²⁶ See Tashi Tsering 1985: 198-214.

¹²⁷ For a detailed study of the mechanisms which led to the Nyag rong contest as well as its consequences see Yudru Tsomu 2006.

¹²⁸ E. G. Smith 2001: 250.

¹²⁹ Petech 1973: 121 in Hartley 1997: 15.

¹³⁰ E. G. Smith 2001: 246.

¹³¹ E. G. Smith 2001: 25-26.

¹³² E. G. Smith 2001.

19th century, the House of sDe dge also developed a unique association with the main Sa skya monastery of Lhun grub steng.

The five institutions were the rNying ma monasteries of Kaḥ thog, rDzogs chen, Zhe chen and dPal yul; the Karma bKa' brgyud pa school was represented by dPal spungs.¹³³ I believe it was no coincidence that, considering their equal status and cooperation in serving the king, they later evolved into important strongholds of the non-sectarian Ris med group. The mutual bond between the royal house, the Five Chaplains, and additionally Lhun grub steng, was expressed through patronage, bestowing of titles, as well as appointing reincarnations on the side of the ruler; while ritual service, administrative support and counseling belonged to the duties of the clergy.

The customary tolerance at the sDe dge court received an additional boost as the main masters of the non-sectarian Ris med movement became the consecutive official court preceptors (*dbu bla*) to the royal family. 'Jam dbyang mKhyen brtse dbang po, Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, gTer chen mChog gyur gling pa as well as Mi pham rGya mtsho all exercised this function, which allowed them to receive royal support for the expansion of their activities, but also to reinforce the non-sectarian trend at the sDe dge court.¹³⁴

As far as the nature of their reciprocal relationship is concerned, the link between secular authority and religious power in sDe dge was unlike the structures known from Central Tibet. The specific configuration of power in sDe dge allowed for religious pluralism and was exercised by a many-leveled formation, connecting the king, chieftains, lower-ranking officials and monastic authorities. The nature of these links and agreements was constantly changing; this created a configuration of a more ambiguous and less centralized nature than the one observable in Central Tibet.

Decentralization in sDe dge was constantly progressing, given that the alliances with the dGa' ldan pho brang or the Manchu administration undermined the position of the ruler and compromised the autonomy of the kingdom. What is more, the chieftains, that is lower-ranking representatives of the sDe dge government, were also seeking to reinforce their status on a local level by way of sponsoring religious institutions and influencing reincarnation structures, arranging for the *sprul sku* to appear in noble families.¹³⁵ These factors intensified

¹³³ Hartley 1997: 57-60.

¹³⁴ Hartley 1997: 43. On Kong sprul's relationship with the House of sDe dge see Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 81-83, 114, 145 and elsewhere in that text.

¹³⁵ Hartley 1997: 87-90.

the fragmentation of power, therefore it became increasingly important to maintain coherence with the help of domestic coalitions, be they lay or religious in nature.

The above dynamics paved the way for the Five Chaplains and the Lhun grub steng monastery to exercise real power in the sDe dge area. However, since they represented three different Tibetan Buddhist schools, they helped pave the way for the rise of the great non-sectarian revival movement known as the Ris med.

III.2. “The challenge of spreading the teachings in an unbiased manner” – on Ris med as a movement¹³⁶

I shall now examine the primary players of the Ris med movement, their philosophy, ritual performance and respective agendas. Their agencies will have to be considered within the framework of specific political and socio-economic conditions.

Although Ris med can hardly be considered a monolithic cultural phenomenon, as it is the case with some presentations of the movement,¹³⁷ the people associated with the group did cooperate and share specific views, while “favoring a generalized common goal” of philosophical and practical unification, restoration and reform.¹³⁸ What is more, the social implications of the movement are emphasized in various sources.¹³⁹

Certain texts attempt to deconstruct the Ris med non-sectarianism or question whether Ris med constituted a movement.¹⁴⁰ Nonetheless, my aim for the current chapter is to present the actions of a group bound by a common agenda of religious restoration in the spirit of non-sectarian cooperation. Moreover, their most interesting feature from the perspective of this work is that the members of this movement augmented their influence largely through constructing hermitages, rather than monasteries.

III.2.1. Ris med masters as role models for future revivalists

It was no coincidence that most of the main players in the Ris med movement were born and educated in sDe dge, while others purposely sought to perform their activity in that particular

¹³⁶ Citation taken from Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 443.

¹³⁷ For instance in Ngawang Zangpo 2001.

¹³⁸ According to the internet source “Dictionary.reference.com”: “Movement= a diffusely organized or heterogeneous group of people or organizations tending toward or favoring a generalized common goal: the antislavery movement; the realistic movement in art.” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/movement?s=t> (accessed 05.02.2010). Powers (2007: 359-365) even calls the Ris med a “countermovement,” thus emphasizing the fact that the initiative was a reaction to sectarian strife, stiffness and domination.

¹³⁹ For instance by Schuh, who also uses the designation “sozial-religiöse Bewegung” (Schuh 1976: lvi, lxxii).

¹⁴⁰ For a deconstruction, see Gardner 2007: 112-118. The author also presents a critical overview of a large portion of the existing literature.

realm, nor was it by chance that most of other significant religious enterprises of the 19th and 20th centuries took place in the neighboring domain of Nang chen, which was sDe dge's cultural satellite.

A unique history of religious liberalism, the vibrant intellectual atmosphere, the favorable economic situation, the necessity to form alliances and the pressure from the dGe lugs pa school present in sDe dge were factors that greatly contributed to the initiation of what came to be known as the Ris med.

The founding fathers of the movement are usually thought to be a mastermind trio mentioned in the previous chapter: 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899), 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892) and mChog gyur bDe chen gling pa (1829-1870).¹⁴¹ Hailed as "The Great Revealer Triad" (*gter chen gsum*), these masters were the envoys of the mythical time of advent of Buddhism in Tibet as well as embodiments of its initial founders: mChog gling, hailed as the rebirth of Lha sras dam 'dzin; Kong sprul of Vairotsana, and mKhyen brtse of Vimalamitra. They were said to have been entrusted by Padmasambhava himself to reveal his hidden Treasures.

Both Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse were natives of the sDe dge kingdom and were additionally associated with some of the *dBu bla khag lnga* institutions by education (Zhe chen) and early activity (dPal spungs in the case of Kong sprul). As for mChog gyur gling pa, he made the decision to set off for sDe dge in order to legitimate his gTer ma-revealing mission.¹⁴² Other vital protagonists of the group born in that region included the great scholar with a rNying ma pa background, 'Ju Mi pham rGya mtsho (1846–1912), also connected to the monastic college of the rDzogs chen monastery, one of the foremost in the kingdom of sDe dge.¹⁴³ Another Ris med master born in the cultural heart of Khams was rDza dPal sprul O rgyan chos kyi dbang po (1808-1887). His favorite hermitage was located in the vicinity of the rDzogs chen institute, several hours away from the sDe dge capital.

The aforementioned masters became icons of the Ris med renaissance in their time, but also skillfully perpetrated and created models for religious revival as well as for a successful response to outside pressure, valid also today.

¹⁴¹ For life stories see Dudjom, et al. 1991: 841-848, 849-858 and 859-868 on mChog gling, mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul respectively.

¹⁴² Gardner 2007: 30.

¹⁴³ Dudjom, et al. 1991: 869-880.

III.2.1.1. The “self-made” masters

Several of these main Ris med proponents, instrumental for the revival, were what one would refer to today as “self-made men.” Although Kong sprul, whom Smith calls a “nineteenth-century Tibetan Leonardo,”¹⁴⁴ did finally receive the designation of a reincarnate,¹⁴⁵ it was a relatively late appointment, as he was already in his twenties, and his career as scholar, ritual master and author had already been on the rise.¹⁴⁶

Before *gter ston* mChog gyur gling pa achieved great fame and success in the sDe dge region, he had been an ordinary monk at one of the monastic institutions of the neighboring Nang chen principality.¹⁴⁷ mChog gling met with disbelief in his credibility as a Treasure revealer and in the end had to face expulsion from his home monastery. Disenchanted, he set off for sDe dge in quest for verification of the authenticity of his findings.¹⁴⁸ His alliances with mKhyen brtse, the 14th Karma pa Theg mchog rdo rje (1798–1868) as well as with Kong sprul helped confirm mChog gling’s position as heir of Padmasambhava, and his discoveries marked the beginning of a new era for Khams in its religious, social and political aspects.¹⁴⁹

The career of Mi pham rGya mtsho,¹⁵⁰ whose brilliance later revolutionized the thought and the academic system of Eastern Tibet, also began as an ordinary monk at the ’Ju mo hor college, a branch of the famous Zhe chen monastery, located in the nomadic regions in the north of sDe dge.¹⁵¹ His studies were additionally completed with extensive practice of meditation in retreat and with time, the unknown hermit-scholar developed into a master valued throughout all Tibetan areas for the clarity of exposition and his engagement in intersectorian debate.

By the second half of the 19th century, the *sprul sku* system had apparently become an institution that did not allow for much novelty or creativity on the side of the incarnates.

¹⁴⁴ E.G. Smith 2001: 267.

¹⁴⁵ Thus the designation “Kong sprul,” which is abbreviated from “Bam steng Kong po sprul sku.”

¹⁴⁶ Schuh 1976: li. Kong sprul himself considered the nomination a political move and in his autobiography he relates this fact with a trace of resentment (Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 24). Schuh notes that the *sprul sku* appointment mirrors the deterioration of religious liaisons in Eastern Tibet and supposes that Kong sprul’s critical representation thereof is one of the factors which ultimately turns his autobiography into a Ris med manifesto (Schuh 1976: xl).

¹⁴⁷ For a brief history of Nang chen, see Chapter Six.

¹⁴⁸ Gardner 2007: 30-31.

¹⁴⁹ Especially the connection to the Karma pa hierarch is said to have been important for his recognition and activity as *gter ston*. Compare Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005.

¹⁵⁰ See Schuh 1976: xxvii. For an extensive essay covering most of Mi pham’s writings see Karma Phuntso 2007.

¹⁵¹ The self-perpetuating careers of other Ris med activists could have been the reason behind Tulku Urgyen’s presentation of mKhyen brtse as a “self-made man” (Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 44-45). However, other sources unanimously claim that mKhyen brtse had been recognized as a reincarnate at the age of 12. Compare: Blo gros phun tshogs 1994: 2; Orgyen Tobgyal 1988, and Tulku Thondup, et al. 1986: 215.

Reincarnate lamas were expected to fulfill monastic duties, which imposed on them the roles of administrators, financial proprietors, politicians and judges, not to mention the fact, that monastic doctrine often pressed a teacher into unyielding sectarian roles. Moreover, the whole state of affairs allowed for a lot of room for corruption and power games; especially the more prominent reincarnates were controlled by the influential *bla brang* coterie. As I already mentioned above, the elevated social position the *sprul sku* enjoyed was greatly valued at sDe dge and became an important instrument of the chieftains' local politics.

Thus, it appeared that certain ambitious individuals could ascertain the role of reformers and revivalists only as freethinkers who either emerged or operated outside the *sprul sku* structures. Actually, it was not so much that gaining authority in an independent manner caused the Ris med masters to function totally beyond the establishment: paradigms for "self-made" Tantric masters had been recognized in the past, with icons such as once more, the celebrated Mi la ras pa. Not only this, I also mentioned that Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse and mChog gling eventually did present themselves (and viewed each other) as rebirths of important ritual masters of the imperial period. This endowed the new activists with the recognition they needed as reformers, but did not change the fact the two of the triad rose to a high standing in the religious and social hierarchy via their own talents.

The model of a "self-made" saint is valid today again in the context of post-Mao ethnic-religious revival in Khams, especially as a result of ruptures in the flow of religious lineages. In the case study chapters, I shall present the career of one such ritual expert, modern revivalist and a direct disciple to a Ris med master, who had also risen to his position due to his achievements in meditation and an impressively austere lifestyle. The former's skillful reenactment of the local hermitic tradition, re-employment of sacred geography and non-sectarian cooperation enabled him to rise from a village cadre to a local saint.

III.2.1.2. The scholar-yogins

Reading the life stories of the main Ris med protagonists, one can conclude that they also had their personal reasons for engaging in non-sectarian solidarity and universalistic doctrines. Most of them seemed to have had quite an eclectic background, even if it was usually limited to the more *shamanic* network of the *sgrub brgyud*, and remained beyond the *clerical* dGe lugs pa sphere of influence. Thus, Kong sprul was born to a Bon po family, his primary education was linked with the rNying ma school, but he made his name as a Karma bKa' brgyud pa. mKhyen brtse, although a Sa skya-Ngor reincarnate, had initially studied at Zhe chen and took his monastic vows at sMin grol gling (both rNying ma institutions). As for

mChog gling, he first joined the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud monasteries of dPal med and Nang chen sgar, but his fame spread through his contribution to the teachings of the rNying ma pa.¹⁵²

In contemporary Khams, where non-sectarian cooperation is an important method of ensuring the quantity and quality of revived material, the revivalists frequently have eclectic backgrounds as well as connections with various teachers and institutions of different denominations, even if this occurred for reasons that are connected to the most recent history of Khams pa regions.

All of the Ris med activists themselves epitomized the fusion of the esoteric and exoteric, as they personified the *mkhas sgrub* ("scholar-yogin") ideal.¹⁵³ Samuel maintains:

We can see Rimed as a new attempt at a synthesis of academic and *shamanic* aspects of Tibetan religion that maintained the academic tradition but retained a much more central place for the *shamanic* vision than the Gelugpa synthesis allowed.¹⁵⁴

Also the lamas of the subsequent generations, after the time of the *gTer chen gsum*, frequently specialized in both fields, thus becoming scholar-yogins. The education of a *mkhan po* commonly required that the scholars-to-be enter a period of strict, prolonged retreat after completing a certain stage of their study.¹⁵⁵ Frequently, the same masters would work as academic instructors (*mkhan po*) at a monastic college and meditation teachers (*sgrub dpon*) at a retreat school. The same masters would go on to establish new meditation schools and scholastic centers. The *bshad grwa* and *sgrub grwa* began exchanging their students, so that they could produce the most competent and convincing teachers, even if they later chose to specialize in either the *shamanic* or *clerical* aspect.¹⁵⁶ It was possible not only through role models and reforms, but also due to the resurgence of the Mañjuśrī cult¹⁵⁷ as well as changes in the approach to certain scriptures, e.g. the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* popularized by dPal sprul in the role of both a philosophy manual and a meditation handbook.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² Tulku Thondup, et al. 1986: 215-16, Blo gros phun tshogs 1994: 4.

¹⁵³ On the discussion of the *mkhas sgrub* role model see for instance: Dreyfus 2003: 12.

¹⁵⁴ Samuel 1993: 542. Italics mine.

¹⁵⁵ Kretschmar 2004: 127, 30. This source also contains a brief history of Khams pa scholarship that describes the hermitages of Eastern Tibet established by the *mkhas sgrub*. See Kretschmar 2004: 12, 102-103. Numerous remarks also found in D.P. Jackson 2003.

¹⁵⁶ Smith brings up many examples of famous Khams pa scholar-yogins along with their activities in both *bshad grwa* and hermitages. See: E. G. Smith 2001: 13-31 and 277, n. 39. Also see E. G. Smith 2001: xiii, but especially D.P. Jackson (2003) on the life of the great scholar-yogin of Khams, Dezhung Rinpoche (=sDe gzhungs lung rigs byams pa kun dga' bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1906-1987).

¹⁵⁷ Compare E. G. Smith 2001: 268.

¹⁵⁸ E. G. Smith 2001: 230 and Kretschmar 2004: 128.

The idea of bringing together scholarly and meditative training, fostered by the Ris med movement, is being revived in Khams in the present day. In the case study chapters, I will present how a scholar-yogin supported the revival of the local hermitic tradition and how this yogic training venue is maintained with the help of visiting *mkhan po*.

III.2.2. The philosophy and practice of Ris med

Explaining the term “Ris med” poses certain difficulties, as the masters involved in the 19th century Khams pa renaissance did not provide a clear definition themselves. A definitive clarification is further complicated by the deconstructive attempts that were made, i.e. claims that the actions and ideas of the group centered around mChog gling, mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul were merely labeled “the Ris med movement” by Western scholars who followed the insights of E. Gene Smith.¹⁵⁹

Smith himself asserts that much of the activities and concepts of the Ris med are a continuation of earlier ventures by the numerous masters seeking consensus and synthesis.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, critics such as Gardner have seized the same argument and declare that the expression “Ris med” is an artificial concept, conceived as an analytical instrument of the religious and political occurrences in 19th-century Khams and that no such movement ever took place.¹⁶¹ Be that as it may, Western writings that appeared after Smith’s original publication on Ris med identify a number of movement’s traits, which are covered below. My argument for the existence of a *movement* is based on apparent and intentional cooperation between Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse and mChog gling that spread throughout Khams and continued in the subsequent generations.

If Kong sprul and associates did employ the term “Ris med,” it seems they did so without an initial purpose of creating a specific movement. Around 1842 Kong sprul wrote in his autobiography:

From this time on, the lotus of [my] trust in all teachings of the *muni*, which are undivided by bias (*ris su ma chad pa*), and in the holders of these teachings unfolded impartially (*phyogs med du*).¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Compare Kong sprul, et al. 2003: xviii. Detailed discussion of the development of the label and its reception by the different Western and Tibetan authors by Gardner 2007: 112-118.

¹⁶⁰ See E. G. Smith 2001: 227-274.

¹⁶¹ Gardner 2007: 117-118.

¹⁶² *'di nas brtsam te rin par thub bstan ris su ma chad pa'i bstan dang bstan 'dzin thams cad la dad pa'i padma phyogs med du grol* (Schuh 1976: lvi). The term *Ris med* had also appeared in the *sDe dge rgyal rabs* and later in mKhyen brtse’s writings (see Gardner 2007: 132-33), which included several additional elucidations on his unbiased attitude. Compare Tshe dbang rdo rje rig 'dzin 1994.

Thus, “Ris med” is an antonym based on the original designation *ris su ma chad pa* (from *ris*=limit, party, bias; *ma chad pa*= unceasing, unbroken, undivided, hence: “undivided by bias”), and synonymous with *phyogs med pa*, *ris med pa*, *phyogs med ris med pa*.¹⁶³ Consequently, conscious non-sectarianism is one of the basic characteristics of the ideal presented by the Ris med triad and their associates. Further traits include 1) non-partiality regarding philosophical viewpoints; 2) favoring the practice of meditation over public rituals (and hermitages over monasteries) – in Samuelian terms the *shamanic* over the *clerical*; 3) revisiting the Indian Buddhist ideals; 4) dedication to the preservation of oral and scriptural lineages; and finally, 5) maintaining the doctrinal view of the *gzhan stong*.

These were the principles that became the conceptual means to overcome sectarian bias and create a new ideal of a Buddhist practitioner.¹⁶⁴ The views were completed with 6). the emphasis on the gTer ma as new revelations were being included into established lineages and popularized by the combined forces of Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse, and mChog gling. These six traits come together into the characteristic make-up of what I refer to as the Ris med movement throughout this paper; these characteristics were also the ingredients of a specifically Khams pa fusion that helped the emergence of a local hermitic tradition.

Firstly, the non-sectarian approach was combined with the urge to preserve the diverse lineages and singular practices. Practically, it involved the search, collection and passing down of various doctrines and rituals, especially the *sgrub brgyud*, both the ones that still prevailed in the hermitic circles as well as those which were close to extinction. Kong sprul brought these together into large collections. The *Rin chen gter mdzod*, *bKa’ brgyud sngags mdzod*, *Dam sngags mdzod* and the *sGrub thabs kun btus* were vast anthologies of ritual texts including rNying ma pa, Mar pa bKa’ brgyud, Shangs pa bKa’ brgyud, Sa skya pa, bKa’ gdams pa, dGe lugs pa and Jo nangs pa, complete with commentaries and instructions for their application in retreat.¹⁶⁵ They were transmitted in clusters of empowerments (*dbang*), which granted the recipient the option to practice any one of the hundreds of the *sādhana*s within.¹⁶⁶

The opening proclamation of beyond-sectarian thinking seems to be the *Shes bya mdzod*, also referred to as “Kong sprul’s encyclopaedia.”¹⁶⁷ However conservative in style, it is

¹⁶³ Pema Kunsang 2003, s.v. “*ris med*.” For the synonyms see Hartley 1997: 49.

¹⁶⁴ Gardner 2007: 117 and Samuel 1993: 533-543.

¹⁶⁵ Kong sprul, et al. 1995: 33.

¹⁶⁶ Samuel 1993: 533-543 and E. G. Smith 2001: 197. Bon was often incorporated; for Kong sprul’s claims on the equality of Bon and rDzogs chen see Tsering Thar 2002: 9.

¹⁶⁷ See E. G. Smith 1970.

within the *Shes bya mdzod*, completed over the years at Kong sprul's main hermitage at the request of mKhyen brtse, where Kong sprul advocates for non-partiality, an idea that would characterize Kong sprul's view of the proper style of Buddhist practice.¹⁶⁸

The *shamanic* aspect of meditation training in retreat was also one more means to transcend sectarian partitions. The techniques of meditation, empowerments as well as other rituals focused on specific deities, involved the cultivation of forces outside and inside the yogin's body. These methods often originated through a gTer revelation and were being amassed into great collections in order to make them available to practitioners with any background. The Tantric apparatus helped to access what was understood as the universal basis of all experience, transcending concepts of doctrine and barriers of sectarian division. The rituals were cultivated mostly during longer or shorter periods of meditation in seclusion, which experienced a great revival of popularity in the second half of the 19th century and shall be elaborated on below.

The non-sectarian approach facilitated the collection of diverse material and also the preservation of different lineages. In this way, the lineages were consolidated by the lamas trained in the hermitages established by the Ris med masters. This aspect of the Ris med activity proved to be one of the most significant factors which supported the later, post-Mao religious revival in Khams, due to specific conditioning such as the critical deficiency of qualified specialists. In the next chapters, I shall describe a recent example of one such revivalist, whose agency was crucial to the preservation of Tantric Buddhism in Khams, since he was able to serve as a direct source of transmissions stemming from diverse schools and lineages.

The unbiased approach of the Ris med masters manifested in their tolerance and openness for all kinds of doctrines to such an extent that the group never asserted the superiority of one specific philosophical view. The view strongly promoted by Kong sprul was the *gzhan stong*, the affirmative explanation of *śūnyatā* associated with the Jo nang school, which had been adopted earlier by the bKa' brgyud pa scholar Si tu Paṇ chen Chos kyi 'byung gnas (1700-1774), who had also been active in sDe dge.¹⁶⁹ To Kong sprul, the *gzhan stong* was a "unifying concept" that connected the various schools of Tibetan Buddhist thought.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Some authors, such as Gardner (2007), do attribute a degree of sectarianism to Kong sprul's activity. This matter is explained in greater detail below.

¹⁶⁹ See: E. G. Smith 2001: 90, 251; Kong sprul, et al. 1995: 34.

¹⁷⁰ Kong sprul, et al. 1995: 266. It could also be argued that if one view is placed above all others as the "unifying concept," it is equally a way for one to become biased. Compare Gardner 2007: 145. Moreover, some masters connected with the Ris med, such as 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho, also claimed the validity of the Madhyamaka

As a consequence of the unbiased approach, the Ris med group developed a predilection for universalistic doctrines. Tenets like the rDzogs chen became the prevailing trend, since this particular system of philosophy and practice left plenty of room for synthetic procedures, given that it emphasized the unconstrained, all-pervading nature of the absolute mind.

Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse, and some of their associates who propagated the Ris med lore, such as Mi pham or gZhan phan chos kyi snang ba, also known as mKhan po gZhan dga' (1871-1927), had a strong interest in reviving the old Indian *paṇḍita*-ideal through the thorough reform of the academic system, which at the same time, aimed at counterbalancing the dGe lugs pa influence in Khams pa scholarship.¹⁷¹ mKhan po gZhan dga' became abbot of the newly founded rDzong gsar college (*bshad grwa*), which would become the model college for the new type of religious education.¹⁷² Its famous curriculum of thirteen great Indian textbooks was replicated in practically all non-dGe lugs pa colleges of Khams, beginning with dPal spungs, Thar lam, Kaḥ thog, rDzogs chen, and dPal yul.¹⁷³

III.2.3. “The Twenty-Five Great Power Places of A mdo and Khams”

The gTer revelations, unearthed and popularized in the 19th century created the opportunity to promote Khams as an area of sacred ground, consecrated with the presence of the different enlightened power fields (Skt. *maṇḍala*, Tib. *dkyil 'khor*) and gurus of the past. gTer became potent means to advocate the significance and autonomy of Eastern Tibet, in the face of Qing territorial claims on the one side, and the ambitions of the Central Tibetan government on the other.

In 1857, on Eastern Tibetan ground at dPa' bo dbang chen brag, mChog gyur gling pa revealed a scripture which proved instrumental not only for the purposes mentioned above, but also for the specific aims of the new non-sectarian movement.¹⁷⁴ The *Bod kyi gnas chen rnams kyi mdo byang dkar chags o rgyan gyi mkhas pa padma 'byung gnas kyis bkos pa*, (“An Abbreviated Catalogue of the Great Holy Places of Tibet Arranged by the Wise One of Uddīyāna, Padmasambhava”)¹⁷⁵ as was the case of all Treasure texts, was claimed to have

concepts. This is one of the factors pointing to the fact that the Ris med was by no means a monolithic structure. Compare also E. G. Smith 2001: 231.

¹⁷¹ E. G. Smith 1970: 25.

¹⁷² rDzong gsar monastery and its hermitages in the vicinity of the sDe dge capital was instrumental for the Ris med movement. See: Blo gros phun tshogs 1999, D.P. Jackson 2003: 536 and Kretschmar 2004: 128.

¹⁷³ Kretschmar 2004: 232. The curriculum was seen as non-sectarian in that it constituted a return to the Indian instructions without sectarian interpretation and bias. Also see E. G. Smith 2001: 233, Blo gros phun tshogs 1999.

¹⁷⁴ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 97.

¹⁷⁵ In mChog gyur gling pa 1977.

been authored by Padmasambhava and declared Khams to host five key power places and twenty-five major power places (*gnas chen*), symbolizing the enlightened body (*sku*), speech (*gsung*), mind (*thugs*), qualities (*yon tan*) and activity (*'phrin las*); as well as the four extraordinary locations and eight places endowed with a special power to train the minds of sentient beings.¹⁷⁶ But most importantly, this “narrative map”¹⁷⁷ of The Twenty-Five Great Power Places of A mdo and Khams (*mDo khams gnas chen nyer lnga*) re-constructed the sacred geography and religious history of Eastern Tibet as well as manifested powerful social and political implications.

The text of the revealed scripture begins with the claim that the narrative map designed for Khams can be compared to the samples of Buddhist cosmology present in India and Central Tibet. It is as real and as reliable as the old Indian spatial *pīṭha* networks and the authority behind them, the *Cakrasaṃvara-tantra*; it announces that Khams is the field of activity of Tantric deities, invited by Padmasambhava himself.¹⁷⁸

The narrative map added to the construction of a new territorial identity of Khams. It was an indigenous venture that drew on local resources – the existing sacred geography of the region, inter-sectarian coalition between the meditation schools as well as rituals for the arrangement of space.¹⁷⁹ This local initiative was vital to define Khams pa territory. Prior to the discovery of the twenty-five *gnas*, Eastern Tibet had been a fragmented area, with foreign powers from the East and the West seeking to incorporate the vast, fertile and strategically important region by repeatedly delineating its borders. The inner conflicts did nothing to prevent this; the bloody Nyag rong conquests ultimately compromised the independence of Eastern Tibetan kingdoms more than they helped to unify their vast territories.

Especially Qing cartography sought to define the perimeters of their empire such that it could prevent the multi-ethnic fringe from developing autonomy and to keep outside forces at bay. By 1850's, the Middle Kingdom was already losing control of its peripheries. The Qing emperors understood the political significance of map-making, so delineating the territory of Khams became a part of the imperial campaign for mapping the changing face of new China, especially in the face of border disputes with Lha sa.¹⁸⁰

Holy places had previously existed on Eastern Tibetan ground, but it was the discovery of the narrative map that made possible to present them as a concise system that could be

¹⁷⁶ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 97-8.

¹⁷⁷ For the use of this term see Huber 1999: 61ff and Gardner 2007.

¹⁷⁸ Gardner 2007: 52.

¹⁷⁹ Gardner 2007: xiii.

¹⁸⁰ Gardner 2007: 152-153.

implemented into the ritual, political and social landscape. The twenty-five *gnas*, which translated the fragmented area into a distinct territory, was as native project that offered an opportunity for Khams to gain independence from the powers in Lha sa and Beijing – even if this autonomy was primarily understood in ritual terms, and as such existed mostly on the figurative level. However, with the help of the narrative map, in the second half of the 19th century, the concept of *gnas* could reinforce the awareness of local identity. This was achieved by means of reaffirming ancient, indigenous values through gTer, in contrast to other identities: Khams versus Central Tibet or Qing China, politically weaker schools (mainly rNying ma pa) against the more dominant, *clerical* dGe lugs pa and Ngor pa sects.¹⁸¹

A similar process is taking place today. In the case study chapters, I will argue that sacred geography, religious history, myth, ritual and powerful paradigms of a hermitic lifestyle are applied today by the contemporary activists of the ethno-religious revival in order to counteract the repressive policies of the state and to accentuate ethnic and local identity.

The new way of perceiving Eastern Tibet as a pure field empowered by Padmasambhava also became the means to legitimize the religious and secular power held by the Ris med triumvirate.¹⁸² gTer recalled the authority of the past and as such was significant for building up the authority of the new movement, and although the Ris med group defined the influence of Treasures as religious in nature, eventually they too found their social and political modes of expression.

The disclosure of the narrative map occurred in the initial phase of the alliance between Kong sprul, mChog gling, and mKhyen brtse. Although both Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse had known mChog gling already since 1853 and played significant roles in the process of his recognition as Treasure revealer (which took place between 1853-55), their mutual exchange and collaboration would fully flourish only after 1857, as they began their cooperation through the revelation, transcription and popularization of various gTer ma, especially those centered around the cult of the new power places. Thus, developing literature on the Khams pa *gnas* became vital for cultivating the relationship between Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse and mChog gyur gling pa.¹⁸³ Their triple coalition, consolidated by means of the narrative map, contributed to the dissemination of the Ris med ideology and practice and to solidifying their individual standing as important masters, whose initiative, textual works, political opinion and

¹⁸¹ Compare Rheingans (n.d.): 22-23, Schuh 1976: xxx-xxxi, E. G. Smith 1970: 23, Gardner 2007: 45.

¹⁸² Compare Gardner 2007: 57.

¹⁸³ See Gardner 2007: 21-44.

ritual support were gaining increasing influence in the religious and political life in sDe dge and in adjacent polities of Khams.

Alexander P. Gardner claims that the discovery of the narrative map of the twenty-five *gnas* was actually triggered by Kong sprul's ambition to promote his hermitage at Tsā 'dra, where he had moved in 1842.¹⁸⁴ This new gTer ma finding and the subsequent revelations that proclaimed Tsā 'dra Rin chen brag to be standing on sacred ground, became landmarks in the development of the hermitage. Its ritual meaning increased together with its outer dimensions – it was no coincidence that after the numerous Treasure extractions, including the gazetteer of that holy site, Kong sprul could afford to expand the infrastructure and launch his plan of instigating structured meditation training in closed retreat.¹⁸⁵ His schooling program, devised specifically according to his own understanding and interpretation of Buddhist theory and practice, helped build up his independent status as religious reformer. However minute in its original size, the meditation enclosure (*sgrub khang*)¹⁸⁶ of Tsā 'dra along with its specific curriculum made a lasting impact on the development of the bKa' brgyud schools.¹⁸⁷

The narrative map of the twenty-five *gnas*, both as one of the first fruits of the new union of religious leaders and as an original topographic design, constituted an important factor in the delineation of the Ris med territory. The scripture, revealed by mChog gling and transcribed by Kong sprul, outlined a network of sites, whose identification, ritual opening and popularization depended entirely on the revealer and his assistants. This guaranteed that the specific ideas and interests of the Ris med alliance would find their spatial reference points – an important issue for any new movement, but especially vital in the Tibetan context of the cult of landscape as a living organism, capable of communicating and translating whole ideologies and cosmologies. Consequently, the narrative map became a way to articulate the ideas of the non-sectarian group.

'Jam mgon Kong sprul recognized the meaning of the new ritual demarcation of Khams. Eleven years after the revelation he authored a commentary to the original text revealed by mChog gling. Kong sprul's narrative map, named the *mDo khams gnas chen nyer lnga yan*

¹⁸⁴ During mChog gling's visit to Tsā 'dra, Kong sprul, encouraged by mKhyen brtse's presumption from a year before, as well as his own premonition, asked for a *gnas yig* to be composed especially for that hermitage. mChog gling understood the importance of the new alliance and reacted with a prophecy of a scripture that depicted the special qualities of the place. He promised Kong sprul to deliver it and thus, a few months later, the narrative map came to existence (Gardner 2007: 110).

¹⁸⁵ See Schuh 1976: lxiv, as well as below in the section on the three-year retreat.

¹⁸⁶ *sGrub khang* literally means "meditation house," but the very special feature of this hermitage is its enclosed space and ritually sealed entrance. To emphasize this, I chose to translate the term as "meditation enclosure."

¹⁸⁷ See below for the development of Tsā 'dra as Kong sprul's main site and the source of inspiration for reform of meditation training.

lag dang bcas pa'i mdo byang gi gsal byed zin thung nyung ngu seems to have redrawn the scripture revealed by mChog gling from another perspective, including some urgent political issues of the day.¹⁸⁸ Kong sprul's work was composed in the wake of the bloody Nyag rong campaign, by which the Lha sa government along with the dGe lugs pa sect spread its influence in Khams. This growing dominance clearly influenced the composition as the commentator filled in blank spaces on mChog gling's narrative map. As the reader follows the power places in Kong sprul's description, the sites reveal their broad, diverse religious contextualization – from associations with the rNying ma school, through the different bKa' brgyud sub-schools, Sa skya, Bon, and intra-sectarian lineages such as gCod. However, within this version of the Eastern Tibetan landscape, noticeably absent are establishments of the dGe lugs pa.¹⁸⁹ This reflects Kong sprul's vision of cooperation between the *sgrub brgyud*, the practice lineages: uniting the disjointed territory of Khams under the canopy of the Ris med activity *vis-à-vis* the growing influence of Lha sa, in both the political and religious arenas. Thus, unlike Kong sprul's other writings, famous for their unbounded vision, this act of political and doctrinal resistance is viewed by Gardner as

[...] a decidedly sectarian project by a man who is so famous for his nonsectarianism.¹⁹⁰

III.3. Ris med and retreat practice

With the understanding of how Khams was transformed into a holy land, one can then inquire how this sacredness was utilized. One of the vital consequences of the discovery of the twenty-five power places of Eastern Tibet was opening these sites for religious purposes (*gnas sgo 'byed*) and by establishing centers for practice in retreat, which assisted in the perpetuation of the doctrines and rituals favored or authored by the proponents of the new movement. On the other hand, by the power of the disclosure of the narrative map, some of the hermitages that had already been used by the Ris med group were elevated to the status of *gnas chen*. This is how the widespread Tibetan cult of sacred territories became a decisive factor in the development of new hermitages. In sections below, I shall analyze the question why hermitages were more suitable for the Ris med movement to spread their influence much more than monasteries. The case study chapters will reveal a similar process happening today,

¹⁸⁸ Kong sprul 1977.

¹⁸⁹ For the translation see appendix two in Gardner 2007: 205-218.

¹⁹⁰ Gardner 2007: 111.

as the contemporary revivalists mark their popularity on the Khams pa landscape by means of the many and often sizeable meditation schools.

III.3.1. Hermitages as new religious centers

In 1859, two years after the extraction of the narrative map, mChog gyur gling pa, whose competence as *gter ston*, an envoy of Padmasambhava, had recently been authorized by mKhyen brtse dbang po as well as other hierarchs, met with Kong sprul and advised that a hermitage and a temple be built in each of the twenty-five *gnas*.¹⁹¹ The new movement's proponents were clearly looking for ways to spread their influence and mark the territory of their activity; they did so by establishing hermitages at places proclaimed to be sacred or by declaring that the already founded centers for meditation in retreat, significant for the activity of the Ris med masters, stood on sacred ground. It was at the hermitages of Tsā 'dra, Dzong shod, Kar mo sTag tshang, Ru dam gang gi ra ba, or Padma Shel phug and at around ten other retreat sites that the Ris med masters composed their works, revealed and transcribed new teachings, as well as ensured the continuation of their legacy by training others and exchanging important transmissions. In this way, the practices introduced and popularized by the Ris med, such as those included in the great collections assembled by Kong sprul or mKhyen brtse or found in the *mChog gling gter gsar*, could find natural venues for their performance.

Finally, the Ris med hermitages were the very sites where the three masters built up their power through assisting each other in coining their fame. Thus, the power that the triad exercised in sDe dge was etched into in the landscape of Khams. Furthermore, the spiritual coherence created by mChog gling's narrative map produced a web of interrelated meditation sites – a structure unified, sustained and justified by the doctrines and practices of the non-sectarian movement.

Previously, there had been similar patterns in Tibetan history. It was not uncommon for chronicles (*lo rgyus*) and hagiographies (*rnam thar*) to report on a monastery that was established at a site identified as *gnas chen* in accordance with a vision by the founder's root lama (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*).¹⁹² Other sources, such as those belonging to the multifaceted *gnas yig* genre, also account for popular power places crowned over time with the founding of a *dgon pa*. But even though it had been a traditional procedure, establishing religious dwellings at power places found its own mode of expression in the 19th-century Khams. This time it was

¹⁹¹ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 136.

¹⁹² See for instance: Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 13.

not great institutions such as monasteries, rather mainly independent hermitages that marked the expansion of the Ris med.¹⁹³

It seems that during the second half of the 1800's the social and religious *status quo* in sDe dge did not encourage the new movement to found monastic institutions. By that time, great monasteries had already been operating and consuming much of the means and attention of the principal economic and political beneficiaries, both of the private sponsors and the ruling dynasty of sDe dge, the main religious patron in the kingdom and that in spite of the economic surplus generated in Eastern Tibetan regions through the trade in expensive exotic local goods mentioned above. The sDe dge dgon chen, Kaḥ thog, Zhe chen, rDzogs chen, dPal spung or dPal yul were all sizeable monasteries that also possessed additional branches in the neighboring areas. With the number of monks ranging from around 200 (Zhe chen) through 600 (dPal yul) and 800 (Kaḥ thog, rDzogs chen) up to 1000 (dPal spung), they absorbed most of the benefactors could donate. The socio-political organization also left little room for novelty. As corporate landowners under royal custody, bound by a unique tie of mutual benefits and sustained with *sprul sku* candidates from wealthy clans, the monasteries of sDe dge had enough weight to counterbalance the authority of local chiefs.¹⁹⁴ This created a tightly interwoven and unique power structure.

It is also true that the *gTer chen gsum*, later Mi pham and other lamas of the subsequent generation, who were associated with the non-sectarian movement, became the official chaplains of the House of sDe dge. Although in connection with their ritual services, they obtained rewards, favors or occasionally even land, this support was neither regular nor sufficient to administer new monastic establishments. Other financial resources of the movement included sporadic donations of wealthy clans (such as Khang gsar or 'Ja' brag),¹⁹⁵ but since Kong sprul himself promoted his creed by a frequent commissioning of certain rituals, the financial input and output of the group often remained locked within a closed circuit. Such financial conditions did not offer prospects for territorial expansion through founding monasteries.

At the height of the Ris med popularity, heads of great monasteries like dPal spungs, rDzong gsar, rDzog chen or Kaḥ thog actively took part in perpetrating the Ris med thought and rituals, yet, in 19th-century Khams, widening the area of one's influence meant opting for original ways to win new territories. For Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse and mChog gling, it was

¹⁹³ Huber (1999 c: 246) mentions a parallel from the 13th-century bKa' brgyud pa expansion into the holy sites of Tsā ri and La phyi: see below for additional details.

¹⁹⁴ See Hartley 1997: 38.

¹⁹⁵ The orthography of 'Ja' brag is uncertain.

not enough to settle in the existing *ri khrod*, habitually associated with a monastery by means of doctrinal and financial support, since this meant dependence on those institutions. Exerting greater influence and instigating reform required more self-reliance, which implied acting from a self-created locus of power.

Kong sprul was very talented in this regard and gradually built up his position by settling at an unknown site, which he then elevated to the rank of *gnas chen* and *gter gnas*. Later in his life, the decision to rely on Tsā 'dra as an area for autonomous activity proved to be valuable for both continuing his work and sustaining his authority, since Kong sprul was expelled from dPal spungs in 1873 due to internal feuds concerning his preceptor, dBon sprul (?- 1873). Schuh and Zangpo both claim that the opposition against him arose as a reaction to the growing importance of the Ris med ideology and practice. Whether their claims are accurate or not, Kong sprul steered clear of the seat of the Si tu pas for fourteen consecutive years, and the hermitages he had founded became his refuge.¹⁹⁶

As abbot and chief reincarnate at rDzong gsar, 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse was compelled to operate within the framework of this major Sa skya institution, but both as a prolific *gter ston* and innovative scholar, he probably required a shift from the ritually and doctrinally predetermined environment of the monastery to more *shamanic* places, where he would be able to express his creativity. In fact, the locale of Padma Shel phug,¹⁹⁷ which became the latter's main hermitage, is emblematic for mKhyen brtse's unique position in, or perhaps slightly outside of, the *clerical* world. Greatly elevated above his monastery of rDzong gsar, this remote cave complex provided the space necessary for the meditation of a visionary, the pioneering work of a *gter ston* and scholar with a wide, non-sectarian approach.¹⁹⁸

As it was already mentioned, mChog gling was the most *shamanic* of the great triad, therefore he was in need of validation of his authenticity as Treasure revealer. The authorization also required an appropriation of territory, spreading into new areas – a practice well known in history of gTer ma.¹⁹⁹ The newly opened ritual landscape provided a perfect scene for the expansion of the movement, especially if the newly established *gnas* and

¹⁹⁶ Kong sprul, et al. 1995: 31-32 and Schuh 1976: lxxii-lxxvi.

¹⁹⁷ For more on Padma Shel phug, see my upcoming publication: "The Lotus Crystal Cave: Reflections of Ritual and Social Renewal in Khams."

¹⁹⁸ The *yang srid* of mKhyen brtse, Chos kyi blo gros, the successor and great propagator of the Ris med activity even had the wish to move to Padma Shel phug entirely. This occurred when he took a consort; this way his relationship to the site again became linked with gTer revelations (Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008: 128). The same master also developed a nearby retreat school at dKar mo sTag tshang, famous for its five-year non-sectarian curriculum, revived in the 1990's. See Blo gros phun tshogs 2004-2005: 35.

¹⁹⁹ See Erhard 1999: 233.

hermitages were skillfully connected by means of the same philosophy, authorities, symbolism and practice.

Today, a network of new and re-established Eastern Tibetan hermitages has again become an independent setting suitable for spreading ideologies that flow around or oppose the *status quo*. Active within this network are lamas who, much like mChog gling and Kong sprul, needed to legitimize and channel their activity through founding their own retreat sites, where the naturally *shamanic* environment opens possibilities for reform and innovation.

When establishing centers for retreat that functioned independently of the great monasteries, the Ris med group presented themselves as reformers who questioned the traditional position of monasteries as leaders in the perpetuation of Buddhism. At the same time, they drew attention to the fact that monastic schools played a role in creating dissent through constructing rigid sectarian identities. This is quite apparent throughout Kong sprul's writings. It was the Eight Great Chariots [of] Practice Lineages, *sgrub brgyud shing rta chen mo brgyad*), a specific system of categorizing Tibetan Buddhist developments that Kong sprul favored over the less sophisticated division into the monastic schools of rNying ma, Sa skya, bKa' brgyud, dGe lugs and their sub-sects.²⁰⁰ In contrast to these institutional bodies, characterized by hierarchy and self-regulating administration, the Eight Great Chariots were vehicles of transmission that had originated in India and were perpetrated according to lineages of accomplishment, where gurus passed down not just the scriptural corpora, but most importantly, the essence of ritual and mystical experience.²⁰¹ This approach to the entirety of the Buddhist doctrinal architecture was more suitable to be disseminated in *shamanic* surroundings.

Several scholars, such as Samuel, argue that a *clerical* environment imposed creating an institutionalized framework that in the case of Ris med, would entirely contradict the eclectic flow of doctrines and their *shamanic* practice concerned with individual spiritual growth.²⁰² However, it must be emphasized that it is a simplification to claim that Kong sprul and his colleagues wholly rejected monasticism, as is sometimes asserted.²⁰³ As clever reformers, the *gTer chen gsum* must have known that the best way to make a lasting impression in religious history is by introducing innovations while relying on the support of the establishment,

²⁰⁰ Kong sprul did not invent the eight-fold system, but greatly popularized it through the *Shes bya mdzod* and most of all, by utilizing the structure as a composition principle for the *gDams ngag mdzod*.

²⁰¹ Kapstein 1996: 277-280. See also Thub bstan nyi ma 1999. For an exposition in English see Ngawang Zangpo 2001 and Ringu Tulku 2006.

²⁰² Samuel 1993: 537-8.

²⁰³ See Powers 2007: 362, Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 24-25.

instead of overthrowing it completely. Accordingly, mKhyen brtse upheld his seat at rDzong gsar and kept his position as head of the monastic community, although he mainly stayed in retreat at his bKra shis lha rtse residence above the monastery grounds. Kong sprul skillfully used the existing web of great monasteries to acquire education (Zhe chen and dPal spungs), and to develop his career and propagate the Ris med ideology (dPal spungs, rDzong gsar). As for mChog gling, this master, thought to be the most *shamanic* of the great triad, actually founded several monasteries, when he was at the peak of his career. Two of them, Karma and gNas rten were associated with the *gnas chen* that his narrative map extolled.²⁰⁴

In the next generations, the movement expanded even more and its rituals, texts and practices were infused into virtually all non-dGe lugs pa monasteries in Khams. At the same time, the new generation cultivated the Ris med tradition in the hermitages founded by the original triad. At present, the amalgamation of *clerical* and *shamanic* is again supporting the revivalist cause. In the case study chapters, I present how a network of hermitages cooperates in a non-sectarian manner and how their *shamanic* activities strongly rely on the local *clerical* structure.

III.3.2. Contextualization as a means of expansion

Contextualization in space and in tradition became an important method by which the 19th-century non-sectarian masters legitimated their own status and ideology. The primary method was expressing new trends in the broad framework of gTer ma mythology.

The numerous publications on the newly founded power places, both as revealed material and the texts composed by the trio – the guidebooks (*gnas yig*), inventories (*dkar chag*), eulogies (*rtogs brjod*) or supplications (*gsol 'debs*) helped to develop the cult of the exceptional new sites. A brief look into one of Kong sprul's compositions of that sort uncovers a strategy typical for religious organizations aiming at a ritual “colonization” of an area. In the beginning in the 13th century, the 'Bri gung pa and 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa lamas arranged the landscape of the south-western Tibetan power places of Tsā ri and La phyi according to the cosmic drama of Cakrasaṃvara and to the geographic representation of the life story of Mi la ras pa – as transmitted by the hierarchs of their sects. The “colonization” was literal, as they established themselves in the various hermitages at the mentioned areas and developed a literary corpus that extolled the values of the sacred landscape there.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Karma, situated right next to the oldest seat of the Karma pas in Eastern Tibet; rTsi ke, close to sMan bda'; gNas rten in Ri bo che; and gTer ston in Nang chen area. See Karma phrin las 1965: 66.

²⁰⁵ Huber 1999: 246.

However, their descriptions of hallowed ground were not only conceived as eulogies: as Toni Huber has it, *gnas yig* often entail a strong didactic purpose.²⁰⁶ In fact, they frequently served as advertisements and promotions of particular Tantric cosmologies, masters, entire lineages or schools and as such, they were used as tools to win primacy over Quintman's "contested space/ contested place."²⁰⁷

The same was true about Kong sprul's vision of the sacred geography of Khams. His *Thugs kyi gnas mchog chen po de bī ko fī tsā 'dra rin chen brag gi rtog pa brjod pa yid kyi rgya mtsho'i rol mo*, written in 1859, extolled the qualities of his first hermitage at Tsā 'dra Rin chen brag, as the title suggests, but also provided a general, broad definition of a power place.²⁰⁸ Even if his discussion of *gnas* draws on centuries of traditional Tantric Buddhist discourse, in the context of a new movement expanding its influence, it becomes more than just another commentary.

According to the classical explanation delivered by Kong sprul, a *gnas* is not a fixed entity, but a reflection of the pilgrim's cognitive level. For the reader, this meant to depend on those, who are able to grasp the ultimate meaning of a site, which practically amounts to the author and his collaborators, responsible for the disclosure of the *gnas yig* text as well as for the consecration and development of the venue. The indirect message of Kong sprul's definition is therefore: "anyone who relies on us, will obtain the blessings of this holy place." Here again, a *gnas yig* text becomes an instrument for controlling space, as well as an indirect advertisement for the Ris med ideology and its territory as a pilgrimage destination.

The sacred geography of 19th century Khams seemed to reflect the main interests of the Ris med movement: unification and invigoration of the different religious currents.²⁰⁹ This came about in many ways. Non-sectarian cooperation, just like sectarian practice, needs to be attributed to an area. With their narrative maps, mChog gling and Kong sprul drew attention to their place of activity:

Simply locating these places on a map forces one to reevaluate the presumed structural partitions. Collaborations happen on the ground, but if that ground is not known, the activity that took place there cannot be recognized. Without a spatial foundation, the history of Tibet drifts away.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Huber 1994: 40.

²⁰⁷ Quintman 2008.

²⁰⁸ Kong sprul 2005: 34-35.

²⁰⁹ Huber 1990: 413.

²¹⁰ Gardner 2007: 170.

In Tibetan history, the need for creating networks of consecrated sites and contextualization within existing ones was a factor that not only created competition over locations, but also brought the various sectarian and historical influences together. Accordingly, the designations of some of the sites revealed by mChog gling alluded to well-known pilgrimage destinations situated in dBus and in the greater Tibetan region. For instance, the site of sKyo brag seng ge rdzong, mentioned in the first position on the narrative map and situated in the vicinity of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud pa monastery of sKyo brag, could easily be associated with any of the existing sites with a related name; in fact, a Seng ge rdzong *gnas* had already been in operation in the Nang chen area.²¹¹ Moreover, as presented in the case study chapters that elaborate on the very location of sKyo brag as a local power place connected to a newly built hermitage, a considerable body of textual sources had existed on this site and the chronicles that had referred to the sKyo brag *gnas* by the designation of Seng ge rdzong preceded mChog gling's discovery by over five centuries.²¹²

Since the narrative map of Khams presented the new *gnas* in coherent unification with the established ones, the newly founded venues were automatically legitimated; the same was possible for mChog gling's legitimation as an authentic *gter ston*.²¹³

Tsā 'dra Rin chen brag, which became Kong sprul's main hermitage and headquarters, openly alluded to the famous Tsāri, itself a Tibetan replica of the Indian site of Cāritra.²¹⁴ As Toni Huber observes, when in his guidebook to Tsā 'dra Kong sprul equates the venue with the great *pīṭha* of ancient India as their "branch" (*yan lag*) or "division" (*bye brag*), he employs typical Ris med rhetoric. Here, Kong sprul deliberately places the new *gnas* into the traditional Indian Tantric context, and instead of asserting that his site would be the only

²¹¹ Gruschke 2004: 251 n. 62 and 110.

²¹² Additional examples: It was perhaps no accident that the name of Padma Shel phug, describing mKhyen brtse's very own hermitage, was identical with a meditation cave (*sgrub phug*) of Padmasambhava situated in Central Tibet, which mKhyen brtse himself attributes in his *gnas yig* to the holy places of that region; see Ferrari 1958: 51. The *ri khrod* of dKar mo sTag tshang, a popular place for practice among the Ris med masters, was believed to be a component of thirteen other "tiger nests" (*stag tshang*) connected with rDo rje gro lod, a wrathful aspect of Padmasambhava, portrayed riding a pregnant tigress. Compare Blo gros phun tshogs 2004-2005: 35. Furthermore, there is some textual evidence as to the fact that a location associated with Guru Rinpoche and named sTag tshang had already existed in Khams long before mChog gling's narrative map emerged— if not as actual pilgrimage and meditation venue, then at least in the gTer literature through the revelation by sTag sham nus ldan rdo rje (1655-?), also known as bSam gtan gling pa. See sTag sham, et al. 2002: 134. Furthermore, Kaḥ thog and Kaṃ po gang ra had already been well known as places of meditation and learning, Nam kha mdzod had been recognized as a holy site between 1613-1622 and much of the glory of Ru dam gang gi ra ba or 'Og min Karma was borrowed from its immediate vicinity to the ancient monasteries of respectively, rDzogs chen and Karma'i dGon, the original seat of the Zhwa nag Karma pas. See Karma rgyal mtshan 2007: 315-324.

²¹³ Compare Gardner 2007: 23.

²¹⁴ Tsā 'dra = "like Tsā ri"; the place is equaled to Devīkoṭa.

genuine Cāritra and Devikoṭa on Tibetan soil, he presents the new power places as coexisting with the venues established previously in Central and Western Tibet.²¹⁵

Like both of his illustrious colleagues, Kong sprul had gone to Tsāri for a pilgrimage in 1857-58. With Tsā 'dra affirmed in the role of a power place, he could proclaim that Khams pa pilgrims did not have to undertake the arduous journey, rather that the holy place itself would appear in Eastern Tibet.²¹⁶ The claim elevated the Khams area to a position equal to Central Tibet both in the religious and mundane sense of the word.²¹⁷ This was crucial, especially in the light of the denigration that the Lha sa principality often displayed in relation to the Khams pa politics and peoples. Again, Kong sprul's agenda revealed the aspiration to establish geographical coherence within Khams due to its progressing political fragmentation and vulnerability to outside forces.

The fact that the twenty-five *gnas* were all connected and contextualized within the same ideology, vision of history, teachers, doctrines, scriptures and rituals, contributed to the consolidation of Ris med as the Khams pa tradition. Today, many of the twenty-five power places are being revived and new networks are appearing. In the case study chapters, I will argue that contemporary hermits are again claiming territories through religious history, myth and ritual and sketching their own coherent field of autonomy and power *vis-à-vis* state control and oppression. Much like the Ris med movement, they cooperate in a non-sectarian fashion to recreate the kind of territory, past, philosophy and practice that would prove capable of counteracting foreign domination and deprecation.

III.4. gNas, retreat and gTer ma

The fact that the new *ri khrod* and simultaneously, points on mChog gling's narrative map were also revelation sites, particularly by virtue of the discoveries of the gTer chen gsum triumvirate is another illustration of connectivity and contextualization of the 19th century Khams pa hermitages. Since the Ris med hermitages were founded at power places, the concept of *gnas* was an essential factor that assisted in shaping 19th-century retreat practice. Even if in the context of the entire pan-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, hermitic practices have gained much to its interdependence with the various *gnas*, the Ris med masters particularly appreciated the importance of acting from the position of meditators stationed on holy ground. The fusion of the three phenomena – gTer ma revelations, solitary meditation practice and the

²¹⁵ Huber 1990: 414-415. Also see Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 169-223 for Kong sprul's description of categories, qualities of *gnas* in the context of Tantric practice.

²¹⁶ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 98.

²¹⁷ Schuh 1976: lxxv.

cult of power places – became a typically 19th-century Khams pa mixture that helped spread non-sectarian ideas. The three interdependent factors influenced one another to greatly contribute to the activities of the new movement, which subsequently reshaped the religious scene in Eastern Tibet for generations to come.

For its entire fixation on consecrated articles and ritual actions, which are always location-contextualized, Treasure revelation is one of the most remarkable practices dealing with sacred geography.²¹⁸ In the 19th century, gTer ma became one of the chief vehicles for propagating the ideology of the non-sectarian movement. Particularly the new discoveries and using the sites of their revelation to establish centers for meditation in retreat became the most significant ways in which the Ris med expanded and marked their area of influence.

Through the delineation of their narrative maps, both mChog gling and Kong sprul attempted to extend the mythical splendor of the old empire by installing and assimilating the spatial arrangement of *gnas* connected with Padmasambhava in the topography of Eastern Tibet. However, the verified practice of assimilating holy sites might have served one more point of the new movement's agenda. As Quintman notes, "landscape forms the fundament upon which [...] life story might be written." Well aware of the locale-based hagiographic tradition of Mi la ras pa as well as Padmasambhava himself, mChog gyur gling pa along with Kong sprul were ready to conquer new land to create their own legend by means of what Quintman calls "a geographic biography."²¹⁹

The life of Padmasambhava had left an imprint on the Tibetan landscape before the 19th century, when the topography of his presence became a vehicle for promoting new ideas. Quintman, who discusses the relationship between biographies of Tantric masters and power places, has noted that the role of time in Tibetan hagiographies is diminished, whereas the constituent of space is emphasized.²²⁰ This is also true for the records of the life of Padmasambhava. By delineating their narrative maps, mChog gling and Kong sprul became architects of the mythical landscape of Padmasambhava's life. Most of the Ris med Treasures pointed to the growing cult of Padmasambhava as both father of lineage transmission and legendary hermit who used the twenty-five locations in Khams to meditate in seclusion and

²¹⁸ Germano 1998: 84.

²¹⁹ Quintman 2008.

²²⁰ Quintman 2008: 4.

attain *siddhi*.²²¹ The reenactment of his legacy in the form of a revelation ritual is also inevitably linked to a specific location. Gardner maintains that:

Whatever the origin of the treasure tradition, certainly by the nineteenth century the matter of place has become one of central importance. Without attention to place, the narratives of treasure revelation are merely fantastical, shorn of real-world concerns of the revealer and his patrons.²²²

This also explains the urge to establish the new teachings through constructing new hermitages. Since most of the new gTer mas were linked to the rDzogs chen tradition, its revival as an all-embracing teaching transcending sectarian divisions, whose ultimate meaning is to be experienced in *samādhi*, harmonized with the tendency to base one's activity in venues for meditation retreat.

As revelation sites, the *ri khrod* also became literally sources of the new teachings. To name a few examples, the doctrinally important *rDzog chen sde gsum* cycle was extracted by both mChog gling and mKhyen brtse from a cave at Dzam nang Padma Shel phug, which was mKhyen brtse's favorite retreat site.²²³ Furthermore, as mChog gyur gling pa's visited the hermitage of dKar mo sTag tshang, the journey resulted in the disclosure of the *Lam rim ye shes snying po*. As for *Thugs sgrub yid bzhin nor bu*, it was a cycle that mKhyen brtse disclosed while at Kong sprul's retreat of Dzong shod bDe sheg Dus pa. Numerous other examples followed.

Since the hermitages gave rise to instructions that on the one hand constituted complete novelties yet, on the other hand, as in the case of all gTer, consisted of clusters of existing material, they became vital tools in the 19th-century revival. Delivering exclusive material of widely acclaimed heritage, produced in large quantities, was a proven method to control the circulating doctrines and thus to dominate the religious scene of the *sgrub brgyud*. In light of the fact that the hermitages, where the power of the new movement was concentrated, were quite literally sources of their doctrines, the *ri khrod* network helped to channel the spreading ideological influence of the Ris med group. As the authority of the Three Revealers became physically implanted into the landscape of Eastern Tibet, the authenticity of the new philosophical systems or liturgies, such as the *rDzogs chen sde gsum*, *Bar chad kun sel* or any of the newly founded Vajrakīlaya rituals was validated, as is the case with any gTer ma, by

²²¹ For instance, sKyo brag seng ge rdzong in the Nang chen area, Number One on mChog gling's narrative map, where Padmasambhava together with Ye shes mtsho rgyal were said to have accomplished the *sādhana* of Amitāyus that is supposed to lead to immortality.

²²² Gardner 2007: 170.

²²³ More on the importance of the *rDzogs chen sde gsum*: Padma Sambhava, et al. 2008: 157-166.

the sacred past of the Tibetan empire to the same degree as it was validated by the legendary figure of Padmasambhava.

Above and beyond, the connection with Padmasambhava confirmed the retreat sites to be potent, which ensured success in utilizing them as centers of activity and meditation training. Beginning in 1856, from the rDzog chen sde gsum extraction at Pad ma shel phug, the blessing force of the new hermitages was proclaimed through the open and spectacular demonstrations of yogic prowess. Public gTer revelations (*khrom gter*) were performed before an audience that often included all social echelons, from common villagers to religious hierarchs and the local ruling class.²²⁴ *Khrom gter* extraction was meant as a spectacle of power and as such, it drew attention to the doctrinal and political agenda of the revealers. Their consecration or literally “opening” (*gnas sgo 'byed*) was likewise a skillful move which increased the probability of funding not just the venues, but also the entire network of rituals, doctrines and their representatives. The soteriological promise embedded in the ground itself and stimulated by ceremonial action also offered encouragement for pilgrimage, which could become means for both social and economic recognition.

In today’s Khams, as hermitages are taking over the social and ritual role of monasteries, gTer and its public display are again an important factor that fuels the perpetration of these new religious centers. In the case study chapters, I will present the miraculous enhancement of one mChog gling’s *gnas*, as a “self-arisen” (*rang byon*) Padmasambhava image, encourages the public to contribute to the growth of the many retreat facilities in the sKyo brag area.

Another strategy of the Ris med movement designed to sustain their hermitages, involved composing special pamphlets or invitation letters. They were placed at well-discernible spots, such as above entrances and doors – hence the name of this quasi-genre, “door inventory” (*sgo byang*). A fair example thereof are the three advertisements for Tsā 'dra, composed after mChog gling’s death by the Kong sprul-mKhyen brtse duo.²²⁵ Kong sprul’s pamphlet encourages one to pay respect to Tsā 'dra by depicting its location and special qualities in great detail, but what is more, it also suggests the most favorable time, i.e. every Sheep Year, at the time of the anniversary of Tsā 'dra’s consecration, especially in the Monkey Month.²²⁶ Additionally, by supplying exact ritual guidelines, the first brochure encourages pilgrims to

²²⁴ Gardner 2007: 109, 244 and: Alak Zenkar 2006.

²²⁵ To be precise, mKhyen brtse co-authored the first two brochures, and the third was composed by Kong sprul after the former’s passing in 1892. Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 98, 116, 232-9.

²²⁶ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 116.

visit, as do the second and third brochures composed respectively in 1883 and 1895. Thus, Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse specify the types of desirable and undesirable behavior that would induce positive or negative *karmic* results. Here, most attention is drawn to the simple and egalitarian practices linked to accumulating merit (*bsod nams kyi tshogs*). Focusing on actions as uncomplicated as circumambulation (*skor ba*), prostrating (*phyag tshal*), or making offerings (*mchod pa*), Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse ensured that the sites they fostered could attract an audience wider than the elite of religious practitioners, who were the primary recipients of their writings.

Retreat sites that at the same time function as pilgrimage destinations and *gter gnas* are again prevalent throughout the contemporary Khams pa landscape. The case study chapters will demonstrate that even if the new *gnas yig* are composed for the learned elites, it is often their folk features that make *ri khrod* an attractive pilgrimage venues and as such, ultimately contribute to the success of contemporary hermitages. The connection between a hermitage and the gTer lore is often maintained even if it bears witness to the past of the site as “contested space.” Local history, as inconsistent as it might be, constitutes an indigenous heritage that has the potential to counteract the imposed and alien version of Eastern Tibetan history as propagated by the Chinese-communist state.

III.4.1. Meditation training on sacred ground

For all of their potency evident through the association with Padmasambhava, which provided adherents a guarantee that training in the new practices would be effective and also promised access to funding, a number of the hermitages associated with the agencies of the Ris med masters developed into venues of yogic education already during the masters’ lives and as such, secured the perpetuation of the doctrines favored by the movement for the future. The systems for meditation in retreat, especially Kong sprul’s three-year program, are again taken up in the Khams pa *ri khrod*, which is elaborated in the case study chapters. The following sections contain a brief discussion of the most significant Ris med hermitages, among which Kong sprul’s main venue of Tsā ’dra Rin chen brag, situated in the immediate vicinity of dPal spungs dgon, played the most important role.

III.4.1.1. Tsā ’dra Rin chen brag

In various autobiographical sources Kong sprul recounts how Tsā ’dra evolved from a dilapidated area that he had adopted for longer personal retreats into a schooling station for

meditators.²²⁷ In 1843, Kong sprul moved to an abandoned retreat site nearby that lie above the already existing, dPal spungs-bound meditation center (*sgrub sde*) by the name of sGrub brgyud dar rgyas gling. Hence Kong sprul's designation of the new site as a "farther retreat site" (*yang khrod*), as opposed to the lower and less remote *ri khrod* mentioned above.²²⁸ The term itself marks Kong sprul's gradual rise toward more independence as a meditator and instructor.

According to Schuh, Kong sprul's position in the religious and social hierarchy was elevated through founding an institution.²²⁹ When Kong sprul moved into Tsā 'dra, his prominence was still on the rise, and he had less than meager provisions for his retreat there, further augmented by the fact that he was rather determined to become completely financially independent from his home monastery.²³⁰ He completed a three-year retreat cycle in 1845, and never came back to dPal spungs but remained at Tsā 'dra composing, practicing intensely, and meeting various important ecclesiasts of the day to exchange teachings. In 1853, his high position as a sovereign ritual master and scholar, who had developed a non-sectarian activity outside of the established religious institutions, must have become uncomfortable for his root guru Si tu. The latter made an attempt to reconnect the young intellectual to his home institution, and Kong sprul's autobiography relates, not without distaste, how the dPal spungs administration proclaimed Kong sprul to be "a rebirth of a certain Kong po lama."²³¹ However, the title only paved the way for the newly appointed incarnate to more autonomy at his own location.

The fact that his hermitage was a major power place and a revelation site played a great role in his recognition. The ritual importance of Tsā 'dra as a copy of Tsāri, one of the twenty-five special places of Padmasambhava in Khams and an independent revelation site has been discussed above.²³² Equipped with such certificates of origin and association, Kong sprul's established seat was ready to make a lasting contribution in the history of Khams pa Buddhism as soon as the renovations, reconstruction work and the necessary consecrations began in 1859. Though Kong sprul had been living at Tsā 'dra for sixteen years already, these

²²⁷ For the detailed history and ritual significance of this hermitage, see Ngawang Zangpo 2001, which is a monograph dedicated to Tsā 'dra.

²²⁸ Schuh 1976: xlv-xlvi. For a brief comparative history of the different hermitages of dPal spungs, see Karma rgyal mtshan 2007: 607-610.

²²⁹ Schuh 1976: lxiv.

²³⁰ Schuh 1976: xlvi.

²³¹ It is uncertain whether Si tu made this move to actually gain control over Kong sprul, but the haste and awkwardness with which the nomination was put forward might suggest ulterior motives rather than a genuine recognition for the talented young lama. Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 23-4.

²³² See Huber 1990: 414-5.

basic restorations still had to be carried out. Consequently, in 1860, the hermitage infrastructure was ready to embrace the first group for Kong sprul's own three-year retreat program.²³³

Contemporary Eastern Tibetan hermits, as they start their teaching activity, are also expected to establish a venue dedicated to training and practice. When that happens, their status in the social and religious hierarchy rises in a way that is no different from Kong sprul's recognition process. As I will demonstrate in the case study chapters, the new meditation masters also make use of the three-year retreat model developed at Tsā 'dra as a means for training in the unique Ris med fashion.

III.4.1.1.1. The three-year retreat

As I have mentioned previously, Tsā 'dra had originally been a deserted place that served as a solitary meditation site only for Kong sprul. However, with mChog gling's explicit encouragement and support, Kong sprul felt personally responsible for arranging it to suit the requirements for meditative training in seclusion.²³⁴ Kong sprul initially had no funds to accomplish this, but while the site's ritual position was on the rise, he could request dBon sprul lama of dPal spungs that the administration of the monastery help with his task of financing the construction of a new temple and later also his meditation school.²³⁵

Having prepared the necessary conditions at Tsā 'dra, Kong sprul especially revitalized the institution of the three-year, three-fortnight retreat program (*lo gsum phyogs gsum*) for monks. In order to facilitate the administration of the two dPal spungs hermitages, he composed his influential retreat manual for guidance during the three-year seclusion.²³⁶

The retreat manual informs us about its curriculum, clearly a display of Kong sprul's affinity for eclecticism and unification. The program, designed for three years, three months and three days of consistent individual and group meditation practice and ceremonies within a ritually sealed enclosure (*sgrub khang*), included liturgies from seven out of Eight Great Chariots.²³⁷ Since the curriculum also included the nearly extinct rituals of the Shangs pa

²³³ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 49.

²³⁴ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 136.

²³⁵ Concerning the financing of the three-year retreats, see Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 128-9, Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 47, Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 139-41, Schuh 1976: lxxv.

²³⁶ Kong sprul 1975-6: 257-320. Translated into English and commented on in Ngawang Zangpo 2001.

²³⁷ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 31.

bKa' brgyud lineage, noteworthy is also the fact that the three-year retreat was an important factor in reviving this transmission.²³⁸

Just as the outline for this type of seclusion become a display of Kong sprul's ideology, it also became central to his heritage. Although the first groups of retreatants amounted to a few individuals and the master himself only oversaw the curriculum of seven or eight groups in the course of his life, it quickly became fundamental for training at most bKa' brgyud pa *sgrub khangs* until the 1950's.²³⁹ Moreover, the three-year training has been widely revived again today – not just in Khams, but also outside of the PRC.

The success of the three-year training was undoubtedly fueled by the graduation spectacle performed by the trainees, which I mentioned briefly in Chapter Two, while discussing Kong sprul's fascination with *Mi la ras pa*. Ringu Tulku describes the occasion in this manner:

On the fourteenth day of the first month of the Water Dog year [1862], the three-year retreatants performed their first cloth-drying ceremony. This ceremony tests the degree to which the retreatants have mastered the yoga of Inner Heat. In the cold winter weather the practitioners remain all night wearing one layer of cotton cloth. In the morning they walk in a procession and many spectators come to watch them. On this occasion there was a lot of heat, so the people felt very blessed and joyful.²⁴⁰

This manifestation of yogic proficiency gained as a result of the *gtum mo* yoga, which was incorporated into the three-year meditative training, later evolved into a custom, repeated in a cyclic fashion at many *sgrub khangs* of the bKa' brgyud and other schools until the 1950's. Just as mChog gling's public revelations assisted him on his way to recognition and fame from 1857 on, the *gtum mo* spectacles helped popularize and perpetrate Kong sprul's program beginning in 1860.

According to the Tibetan historiographic tradition, the idea of meditating in isolation for a period of three years and three fortnights stems from the *Kālacakra-tantra* and has to do with inner workings of the subtle energy body. Kong sprul states in the *Shes bya mdzod*:

If entire wisdom *prāṇa* of one hundred years [which flows through the *nāḍī*] is added up, it is [equal to] three years and three fortnights. When all kinds of *karmic prāṇas* are transformed into wisdom *prāṇa*, [the state of] buddha is accomplished.

²³⁸ Holders of that lineage today, such as Kalu Rinpoche even claim that the establishment of Tsā 'dra had to do with Kong sprul's commitment to a Shangs pa master. For more on the Shangs pa school see E. G. Smith 2001: 54.

²³⁹ The information on the number of retreatants varies. According to Kong sprul's autobiography there were five meditators plus a retreat master and a lama responsible for protective rituals, meaning seven in total (Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 129). The same is reported in Ngawang Zangpo (2001: 49). Kong sprul, et al. (1994: 358) enumerates only four.

²⁴⁰ Ringu Tulku 2007:132-139; also in Kong sprul, et al. 2003:13.

This is the reason why it is said that [the level of] Vajradhāra can be reached by way of [meditation practice during a period of] three year and three fortnights.²⁴¹

As the main founder of the retreat curriculum, Kong sprul already had experiences with the three-year meditation training. He had originally begun it in 1835 at dPal spungs, though he was unable to complete it since he was invited to teach Sanskrit to Theg mchog rdo rje, the 14th Karma pa, only a year after he began his undertaking. Six years later, he was able to maintain his solitude for three years, when he first took up residence at the hermitage of Tsā 'dra. Having realized his aim, he put his curriculum in writing for others to use.²⁴²

The history of the convention of the three-year meditation retreat is vague.²⁴³ Basing their information on the emergence of the *Kālacakra-tantra* in the 10th century,²⁴⁴ several Tibetan scholars today claim it was known in India.²⁴⁵ Another important voice among past authorities on the subject matter belongs to Rang byung rdo rje, the 3rd Karma pa (1284–1339). His *Zab mo nang don* also brings up the relation between a lifespan of one-hundred years and “wisdom *prāṇa*.”²⁴⁶

Tibetan historiography occasionally mentions gTsang smyon's biography of Mar pa Lo tsā ba (1012-1097) as the source of information on the history of the three-year retreat. According to this claim, the three-year retreat was transferred to the Tibetan areas along with other Buddhist teachings at least in the later dissemination phase.²⁴⁷ However, the validity of this argument poses some questions, since this text, as much as other writings belonging to the *rnam thar* genre, was not composed to narrate historical facts, rather intended to be a piece of devotional literature that usually also includes some sectarian polemics and political debates from the author's time. Therefore, the only certain conclusion one can draw from studying this source is that the three-year meditation period was known in the 15th century, at the time of the composition of Mar pa's biography.

²⁴¹ *lo brgya'i ye rlung thams cad bsdoms na lo gsum phyogs gsum yin la las rlung ji snyed pa ye rlung du gyur nas sangs rgyas thob pa'i phyir lo gsum phyogs gsum gyis rdo rje 'chang 'grub par gsung pa 'ang de'i don yin no/* (Kong sprul 1982, 2: 640).

²⁴² Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 39-41, also see Schuh 1976: xxxv.

²⁴³ It would make an interesting topic for further study, unfortunately it exceeds the scope of this thesis.

²⁴⁴ See for instance an entire chapter on the *prāṇa*-winds and drops: Nor bzang rgya mtsho, et al. 2001: 177-194 or V. Wallace 2001: 56-108.

²⁴⁵ For instance mKhan po Nges don, a young scholar of the Karma bKa' brgyud school, trained at a *bshad grwa* at Rumtek monastery in India who is now living in Spain (interview from 16.04. 2010).

²⁴⁶ See: Rang byung rdo rje (n.d.): fol.12r.

²⁴⁷ Interview with Lama Lhundrup of France, 19.01.2010. Also see footnote below.

Other sources on the institution of three-year retreats are sporadic, which is perhaps why no consistent historical explanation is known even by its practitioners today.²⁴⁸ There are many claims in emic literature to this or other master who performed a three-year retreat, but indeed, it was Kong sprul who first systematized this practice, as much as sGam po pa pioneered in integrating the caves of the hermits into the structured environment of the monastery.²⁴⁹

Prior to his outline of the retreat, the isolated three-year practice period was carried out by many schools, though without the fixed guidelines, the fixed syllabus or the characteristic *sgrub khang* enclosure. Kong sprul's originality had to do with designing the characteristic U-shaped retreat edifice with its square courtyard, determining the number of meditators as well as their daily, monthly and yearly schedule as well as the rules and vows to abide by during the seclusion period. Kong sprul was the one who delineated the structure of the miniature community headed by a retreat master (*sgrub dpon*) and supported by a cook; he also pioneered in defining the liturgical essentials and in ensuring the regularity of cohort intakes for the training.

His careful planning of the first three-year schooling period indicates that already at the beginning of his project, he had a precise idea of the potential of such meditation seminars.²⁵⁰ Kong sprul's personal involvement in the preparations included such minute details as the gathering of ritual implements, furniture and household utensils for the individual trainees.²⁵¹ He created additional supportive literature, such as the aforementioned retreat manual, and insisted the trainees study his work, the *Shes bya mdzod*, before entering the enclosure.²⁵²

All of this helped form an environment, which, as Kong sprul believed, would shape ideal practitioners with a solid understanding of Tantric practice and a non-sectarian outlook. Through their specific structure, the experimental retreats at Tsā 'dra became a standard intensive training course for prospective religious instructors. Since the graduates of the three-year program were entitled to educate others, some of them founded additional three-year retreat centers.²⁵³

²⁴⁸ Kalu Rinpoche, Kong sprul's emanation from Tsā 'dra, or Lama Lhundrup, disciple of Gendun Rinpoche (=dGe 'dun rin po che, 1918-1997) of sKyo brag who established the three-year retreat enclosures in Europe.

²⁴⁹ Some other examples can be found in Snellgrove 2002, 2: 496.

²⁵⁰ See Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 140-1, Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 129 and Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 49-51.

²⁵¹ Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 140.

²⁵² Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 51.

²⁵³ Kong sprul, et al. 1994: 358.

Thus, five hundred years after sGam po pa, *shamanic* practices again drew closer to a *clerical* environment. Corresponding to the situation in the 12th century, when structure was needed if the new lineages were to survive on Tibetan soil, in the second half of the 19th-century Khams, a new style of meditation practice in retreat had to win moral and financial support of the religious establishment and possibly become incorporated into the monastic curriculum. Tsā 'dra's training program and its systemic concept developed into the model curriculum at virtually all bKa' brgyud pa monastic and independent hermitages – it is even said that they form a basis for the attainment of the lama title in the bKa' brgyud schools.²⁵⁴ The case study chapters demonstrate how modern revivalists reconstruct this institution and how the *sgrub khang* can coexist with other types of retreat within the boundaries of a meditation school (*sgom grwa*).²⁵⁵

III.5. The hermitages as sources of new teachings: the Treasures and beyond

Through their remoteness and independence, the hermitages of mKhyen brtse, Kong sprul, and mChog gling provided a scene for much of the creativity of the 19th-century Khams: and the ritual acts of Treasure disclosure were not the sole vehicle of reviving extinct and rare transmissions. In fact, the majority of Ris med literary work sprang from the *ri khrod* in question, either via revelation or composition. A few examples include the creation of Kong sprul's major work, the *Shes bya mdzod* that was inspired by a vision mKhyen brtse experienced whilst exchanging teachings and consecrating Tsā 'dra Rin chen brag; this latter site provided conditions for Kong sprul's prolific literary productions.²⁵⁶ dPal sprul's classic meditation manual *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* was written at his retreat in the Ru dam gangs kyi ra ba range above rDzog chen monastery; a key gTer ma cycle of *Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel* was transcribed by the mKhyen brtse and mChog gling duo in the caves of Pad

²⁵⁴ Kong sprul, et al. 1994 and interview with Lama Lhundrup (19.01.2010).

²⁵⁵ Tsā 'dra was not the only center for meditation training, established by the Ris med fellowship. Another center for three-year retreat and Kong sprul's second favorite site of meditation and activity was Dzong shod bde shegs bdus pa, which was also a power place on mChog gling's narrative map of Khams. Around 1880, after a donation was made by the royal family of sDe dge, Kong sprul had another *sgrub khang* constructed in order to popularize his training model. See: Gardner 2007: 155, Schuh 1976: lxii, and Jamgon Kongtrul Labrang 2004: 3-4, 17-21. Moreover, an extended, five-year retreat program was launched at the sMan shod valley, where the main center at another major gTer revelation site was called 'Chi med dKar mo stag tshangs. It was here that Mi pham spent thirteen years practicing and composing in strict isolation. Chos kyi blo gros, the rebirth of mKhyen brtse, rebuilt the site and founded a meditation school (*sgrub grwa*) there in 1932. See Blo gros phun tshogs 2004-2005: 35 and Gardner 2007: 211, 244-248.

²⁵⁶ Gardner 2007: 252.

ma shel phug; rDzong shod bde gshegs 'dus pa saw the compilation of the *Rin chen gter mdzod* as well as the *gGdams ngag mdzod*.

The case study chapters will discuss a contemporary hermitage revived and developed at a venue, which is a branch of one of the power places on mChog gling's narrative map of twenty-five *gnas*. In the 19th century, the hermitage of sPyi 'byams nyi zla phug at sKyo brag in the historical kingdom of Nang chen²⁵⁷ became the stage for the revival of the scriptural and yogic transmissions of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school.²⁵⁸ This occurred through the efforts of mChog gyur gling pa's relative and student, Khrag thung bDe chen 'Bar ba'i rdo rje (1836-1920). At that time, 'Ba' rom pas in the Nang chen realm united the *shamanic* as well as the *clerical* trends in the school: in addition to the great and influential monastery of sKyo brag, the 'Ba' rom teachings and practices were upheld by *sngags pas* from the clan of Tshangs gsar as well as by the *gter ston* 'Bar 'ba'i rdo rje. Both of these *sngags pa* parties simultaneously became involved in the *mChog gling gter gsar* transmission, which occurred in a fashion typical for this type of lineages – largely by way of family ties. Thus, mChog gling's daughter was offered in marriage to a gTsang gsar son, and 'Bar ba'i rdo rje's own sister became mChog gling's principal consort.²⁵⁹ These non-monastic lineages greatly propagated meditation practices in solitude, as described by Tulku Urgyen (1920-1996) in the vibrant tales included in *Blazing Splendor*, the yogic family saga of meditators striving to maintain and pass on the *gTer gsar* within their home hermitages of rDzong mgo gling, Bla khyab, gNas rten, or rTsi rke, occasionally at the cost of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud practices, which by the 19th century had become a rarity.

The “inner autobiography” of 'Bar ba'i rdo rje recounts for the unfulfilled aspiration of 'Jam mgon Kong sprul's to collect the 'Ba' rom pa doctrines and practices, and 'Bar ba'i rdo rje's later efforts to compile them upon his disciples' request.²⁶⁰ The latter is credited to have revived 'Ba' rom pa retreat practice in the sKyo brag area in its practical aspect, by training disciples to perform retreat at Nyi zla phug and other sacred caves of the area, but especially by amassing and composing basic textual support for the 'Ba' rom pa practice – and that both in the 'Ba' rom Mahāmudrā as well as their Thabs lam-streams. It was the 19th-century revival of this school that helped consolidate the reputation that the Nang chen kingdom enjoyed, i.e. as the “realm of meditators” (*sgom sde*). This yogic heritage is very strongly reaffirmed today

²⁵⁷ For a brief history of Nang chen as well as sKyo brag, see Chapter Ten.

²⁵⁸ For a history of 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school, see Chapter Ten.

²⁵⁹ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005.

²⁶⁰ Yeshe Gyangtso 2005: 167-178, Barway Dorje, et al. 2007. Also see gTer chen 'Bar ba'i rdo rje, et al. 1984.

through the revival of the 'Ba' rom hermitic practices in the sKyo brag region, which is discussed in the case study chapters of this dissertation.

Similarly to the legacy of 'Bar ba'i rdo rje's non-sectarian preceptors and colleagues, his contribution to 19th-century Khams pa hermitism included important scriptural activity. It is true that Kong sprul spent most of his life in retreat; Khyentse is credited for similar achievements; mChog gling's breakthrough visions were fueled by a solitary environment; not to mention dPal sprul's or Mi pham's ascetic lifestyle. However, the Ris med brought more than just examples of a simple life of practice in solitude or a network of new hermitages. After all, meditation and founding practice centers had traditionally been activities expected of any Tibetan master of the more *shamanic* practice lineages. Next to promoting the importance of hermitages and to revitalizing oral transmissions that belonged in a solitary setting, it was their impressive textual undertakings, including collecting existing literature and composing new works, that contributed so significantly to the retreat lore. The Ris med masters supplied liturgical texts, retreat manuals, lineage invocations and other literary paraphernalia essential for shorter or longer seclusions. As they then conferred the scriptures along with their oral explications to their disciples, the hermitages of Khams obtained material that ensured their continuation for the future.

Today's hermitages are again sources of new material; at times, they even directly employ the Ris med as label to describe their revivalist undertakings, which is detailed in the case study chapters.

III.6. Conclusions: reforms and consolidation of the Khams pa hermitic tradition

Today, it is difficult to assess whether the efforts of the Ris med group to create a network of active and widely known pilgrimage destinations were effective. However, the symbolic conversion of Eastern Tibetan territory they advocated brought about great changes in the religious and social scene of their time. So how much transformative potential lay in the activities of the movement? What were the specific changes the Ris med introduced that later became the model for hermitic tradition across Khams?

Operating outside the growing dGe lugs pa power structure, the circles of Ngor pa dominance in sDe dge, and beyond the established complex of great Khams pa monasteries, the Ris med masters sought to revive and unify rare lineages while maintaining their vital characteristics. If the sustenance of the totality of Buddhist teachings was one of the principal goals of the movement, the necessary step leading to renewal was reform. Consequently, the

Ris med group formed their own system of spatial, philosophical, scriptural and ritual references that would make a deep and long-lasting impact upon Buddhism in Khams, and for this reason, later determine the agenda, content, styles and strategies of the post-Mao ethno-religious revival, which is addressed as follows.

By means of delineating the territory of their influence, the *gTer chen gsum* first found a symbolic, and then also a practical way to attract attention to their activity. The emphasis was drawn not only to the distinct places, which would nevertheless have been accentuated as Treasure revelation sites, but also on their mutual interdependence. It was partially for the sake of this coherence that the Ris med lamas recognized each other's potential for ritual superiority and bound their efforts together, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. The result was the collaboration on a great non-sectarian vision of Tibetan Buddhist culture, designed and practiced within a network of hermitages; to read the life stories of the Ris med lamas amounts to following their paths in and between those retreat sites. It was this complex of sacred venues that served the Ris med for an organizing principle, helping to create their "corporate identity" and translated their individual actions into what one would call "a movement."

The idea of a religious movement is inevitably bound to bringing about a change. In the case of the non-sectarian association, the reforms did not involve introducing entirely new doctrines or their fundamental reinterpretation, like in the time of the later dissemination period; neither did they entail a critique of ecclesiastical corruption. The Ris med approach was rather different. Using the existing elements, the movement collected, revived and initiated lineages, rituals and philosophical schools to form a powerful new set-up, which was capable of challenging the institutions, whose religious and political agenda was not only irrelevant, but to some extent perilous for Khams pa autonomy and culture. The non-sectarian movement can thus be seen as a reaction of an elite group to the disintegration of both religious and political life of Eastern Tibet in the second half of the 19th century.²⁶¹

This elite then formed a union, which operated principally outside the existing religious power structures, in this case the great monasteries of sDe dge. This was largely possible through their involvement in the *gTer* movement, through establishing their own training centers and through the fact that several of the main players during the first and second Ris

²⁶¹ Ris med seems to bear most of the traits of a reformist movement as described by Bellah (1965: 168-225), who looks at the issues of religion and change in modern Asian societies from the point of view of political and social progress. Although he discusses the changes that occurred in 20th-century Asia, some elements of this discussion can be applied to 19th-century Khams, especially when the author discusses the reactions of religious elites to change.

med generation were individuals independent of the power structures governing reincarnates. Like Mi la ras pa, they climbed the ladder of social and religious hierarchies due to their own efforts and talents. In this way, they could create a counterbalance, capable of reaching new frontiers on the religious and political scene of Eastern Tibet.²⁶²

Scholars concerned with the issue of religious reformism, such as Robert N. Bellah, observe that instigating religious change is inevitably bound with the question of identity more than with the issue of progress, and that one of the main objectives of reformist movements is forging new cultural identities.²⁶³ As previously argued, one of the main points on the non-sectarian agenda was the demarcation, cultivation and promotion of Khams as an area of sacred ground, undoubtedly designed to fuel a sense of a cultural uniqueness and autonomy. For the development of new identities on a more individual level, the Ris med masters emphasized individualistic responsibility, personal engagement and the enhancement of one's own spiritual growth through meditation practice. Their approach was expressed through the endorsement of all doctrines seen as equal, but crowned with the universalistic Ātiyoga view and made available according to the particular propensity of a student. This approach was disseminated through rituals and *sāadhanās*, which the new, self-empowered class of practitioners could perform within the network of independent hermitages, opening the field for the revival and reform of meditation training.

In 19th-century Khams, the scriptural (*bshad brgyud*) and the practice lineages (*sgrub brgyud*) were combined to suit the ideal of the scholar-yogin (*mkhas sgrub*). The fusion of *clerical* and *shamanic* skills accomplished by one person had already been known in Tibetan religious history, but in the second half of the 19th century it gained increasing weight and was best exemplified by Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse themselves, as well as some later lamas such as 'Ju Mi pham. The revitalization of both scholasticism and meditation practice lay at the heart of the Ris med agenda; it was a new potent synthesis of the *clerical* and the *shamanic*, endowed with the potential for bending rigid sectarian positions.²⁶⁴

In order to gain the authority necessary to bring about change and foster new identities, reformist movements rely on past examples,²⁶⁵ hence the self-promotion of the non-sectarian masters as embodiments or at the least as messengers of the polymaths of the Imperial Era. Vimalamitra and Vairocana incarnated in the 19th century in the personas of mKhyen brtse

²⁶² Bellah 1965: 189, 224.

²⁶³ Bellah 1965: 223.

²⁶⁴ See Samuel 1993, 525-552.

²⁶⁵ Bellah 1965: 183, 210.

and Kong sprul were real prototypes of the *mkhas sgrub* ideal, combining erudition and ritual expertise.

Because the *gTer chen gsum* themselves, as well as the Ris med lamas of later generations supported and embodied the scholar-yogin ideal, both the monastic colleges and hermitages of Khams became the centers of the Ris med approach and its practical application. The individuals active in those venues not only comprised the great number of disciples of the original non-sectarian teachers but also the numerous, concurrent cooperatives of reincarnations of the great triad, which at times would further initiate a sub-independent branch of a lineage. Hence, the structures created in the 19th century were maintained by the whole complex collective of the mKhyen brtse *sprul sku*; concurrent emanations of mChog gling each governed a different center that the original master had founded, as did the various reincarnations of Kong sprul, who were connected with monasteries and hermitages of varying sectarian denomination.²⁶⁶

The new Ris med generation oversaw the schooling of teachers at the independent hermitages at many of the twenty-five power places, but also at the monastic *sgrub khangs*. Since the new *sprul sku* of the *gTer chen gsum* and their disciples started appearing more and more in the strictly monastic context, the great monasteries of Khams began providing the scene for Ris med activity. dPal spungs, Karma dgon, Zhe chen, rDzogs chen, even Zur mang, were the venues where the propagators of the non-sectarian masters passed down the vast collections of the *Rin chen gter mdzod*, *mChog gling gter gsar*, *bKa' brgyud sngags mdzod* or the *sGrub thabs kun bstus*. Leaders of great sects or major monastic centers, like the Karma pa hierarchs, the 15th Karma pa mKha' khyab rdo rje (1871 – 1922)²⁶⁷ and the 16th Karma pa Rang byung Rig pa'i rdo rje (1924 – 1981), Zhe chen rGyal tshab Padma nam rgyal (1871-1926), Jam dbyangs Blo gter dbang po (1847-1914) and Dil mgo mKhyen brtse (1910-1991)²⁶⁸ all became holders of the Ris med-originated transmission cycles, and the heritage of the movement began to emerge in an environment that was more and more institutional. Particular rituals revealed by mChog gling even found their place in the monastic calendar – like the 'cham dances or Vajrakīlaya rituals prevalent in the monasteries of the Karma bKa' brgyud.

²⁶⁶ For a graphic representation of the mKhyen brtse, Kong sprul and Mi pham incarnations over the subsequent generations, see: E. G. Smith 1970: 73-78 and Douglas & White 1976: 167-171.

²⁶⁷ See 'Jam dbyangs 1997: 222-223.

²⁶⁸ Dil mgo mKhyen brtse, who was also a member of the mKhyen brtse conglomerate of reincarnates, a disciple of 'Ju Mi pham, as well as a famous hermit, conferred the various collected teachings of the Ris med masters many times to disciples from different schools. He also became an ardent advocate of the twenty-five *gnas* as venues for pilgrimage and meditation. See Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008.

As for the hermitic tradition, it blossomed all the more, due to the polymaths and great activists of the new generations, such as rTogs ldan Shākya Shrī (1853-1919),²⁶⁹ rDzong gsar mKhyen brtse Chos kyi blo gros (1893-1959); Karma Kun khyab dPal bzang po, who became known as Kalu Rinpoche (Kar lu Rin po che, 1905-1989), sPrul sku O rgyan Rin po che (1920-1996) to name but a few: they helped develop the infrastructure and curriculum of the many centers for meditation in retreat, located in the sDe dge and Nang chen area or spread their activity to new places.²⁷⁰

The configuration of hermitages, power places, monasteries, incarnation lineages, doctrines and rituals that were developed from the second half of the 19th century in Eastern Tibet in a universalistic manner characterized the religious and social make-up of Khams until the arrival of Chinese communists and the resulting destruction of Tibetan culture that began in the 1950s. Thus, the referential network created by the Ris med masters came to represent “tradition” to most of the *sgrub brgyud* lamas today, both in exile and within the PRC.

For the urgent lack of competent religious specialists during the early phase of the post-Mao revival, the few lamas trained by Ris med heirs and in the Ris med fashion, i.e. whose education had comprised doctrines and practices of several lineages and schools, also proved instrumental in the process of reinstalling religious transmission in Khams. Hence, as the propagators of Ris med, the contemporary revivalists could generally be seen as long-term products of the great non-sectarian revitalization era.²⁷¹ With the revival of the Ris med networks, they contribute to the re-creation of the unique Khams pa identity in the face of its annihilation, degradation and instrumentalization. In the case study chapters, I will argue that similarly to the 19th-century Eastern Tibetan renaissance, the contemporary hermitic revival constitutes a reaction of religious elites to the socio-political and religious issues of the day.²⁷²

²⁶⁹ rTogs ldan Shākya Shrī was a native of the Eastern Tibetan region of Chab mdo. He was a disciple to mKhyen brtse, Kong sprul and Mi pham. He founded a massive meditation encampment famous for practicing Mahāmudrā teachings on one hillside and rDzogs chen on the other, located around the *gnas* of sKyid phug in south-central Tibet. His disciples and offspring spread his teachings throughout the Tibetan world, generating branches of their activity in regions as remote as Ladakh. See Crook & Low 1997, Chokyi Gyatso, et al. 2009 and Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 129-134.

²⁷⁰ Compare Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008, D.P. Jackson 2003 and Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005.

²⁷¹ Compare Samuel 1993.

²⁷² Sections of the material from Chapter Three on the Ris med movement were published as a journal article; see Przyjemka 2012.

IV. The ethno-religious revival in today's Khams

IV.1. Introduction

As explained in the previous chapter, the specific doctrinal and ritual trends created, developed or revived in Eastern Tibet in the second half of the 19th century shaped the activity of religious professionals, who contributed much to the social and cultural life in many of the Khams pa kingdoms, such as sDe dge or Nang chen.²⁷³ This specific make-up was maintained up to the point of the arrival of Chinese communists in 1950 and until the subsequent destruction of Tibetan culture in the years that followed. Therefore, from the point of view of the “practice schools,” which embraced the majority of religious developments in the eastern areas of ethnic Tibet, to a large extent, the system of those ritual, spatial and historical reference points came to represent what will be described as “tradition.”²⁷⁴

This particular chapter deals with the revival of that tradition that is presently occurring in Khams; it also sketches a general theoretical and factual framework for the ethnographic study. Thus, the present sections will deal with general revival processes, which should also be seen in the context of the religious and ethnic revival occurring throughout all of ethnic Tibet, and even beyond its territories in many areas of post-Mao China.²⁷⁵

Aware of the problematic of specifying “ethnicity,” especially in the context of post-modern discussions and deconstructions of this expression, I will use the definition put forward by Stevan Harrell in his introduction to “Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers.”²⁷⁶

As in the case of any process, it is extremely challenging to portray the revival in Eastern Tibet. Any such development involves an interdependence of the contributing factors and it is virtually impossible to grasp all of them in their complexity and diversity.²⁷⁷ Drawing on Anthony Wallace's assumption that a society resembles a living organism or “mazeway” compelled to cope with harmful influences that he terms “stress,” the dynamic realities in

²⁷³ For more on Nang chen's history, also during the Ris med era, see the historical part of the next chapter.

²⁷⁴ The broader meaning of this term in the following chapters is most compliant with the writings of Eric Hobsbawm. See Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983: 2-3).

²⁷⁵ See Qin 2000, Schrempf 2001, Vermander 2009, Davis 2005. Also see Porter 1993, for a study devoted to Chinese Buddhist and Taoist monks after the Cultural Revolution.

²⁷⁶ Harrell 1995: 28.

²⁷⁷ What is more, the collection of fieldwork material for the present dissertation was completed in 2009, so especially the consequences of the 2011/2012 crackdowns on the Tibetan minority following the self-immolations and the subsequent demonstrations, will not be taken into account here.

Tibetan territories are continually under pressure, which makes it difficult to anticipate where all the changes in the “mazeway” are headed.²⁷⁸

Therefore, this chapter will point out some key characteristics of the Khams pa revival that will aid in the comprehension of its strategies for survival, revival and continuation, but most of all, it will provide the background and context for the case study discussed in the next chapters.

IV.2. Historical background

The Central Tibetan state enjoyed much autonomy under the nominal, or later, actual Manchu rule and *de facto* independence from 1913. Unlike that particular Tibetan principality, direct Chinese control over local polities and everyday lives in many areas of Khams began in the early 20th century. The process accelerated rapidly through the 1950 major military offensive carried out by armed forces of the Maoist regime, which resulted in the transfer of power from local Han and Hui warlords to the communist Chinese. Since the structure of the newly formed People’s Republic required its minorities to adapt to the political center and assimilate its ideology, a radical shift in all areas of life in Eastern Tibet was unavoidable. Especially the launch of “democratic reforms” in 1956 resulted in the gradual eradication of the native culture, which reached its peak during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76).²⁷⁹

The destructive influence of the communist Chinese in Tibetan areas amounts to a progression of increased control and alternately, a release of pressure. The constant fluctuation of policies on the national and local level is further augmented by colonization and economic control. Since 1950, Khams pas have endured a tremendous amount of transformation – from suppression and destruction of traditional culture to the different waves of revival.

However, owing it to the relatively early influence of Chinese reform and state-building processes in Khams, as opposed to the sovereignty of Central Tibetan territories, one could consider whether this historical conditioning makes the Eastern Tibetan revival distinct from similar activities in the TAR area. Undoubtedly, one could classify the Khams pa revival as definitely less nationalistic than in the former domain of the Dalai Lamas. In the beginning of the 20th century, the nation-building project in Central Tibet collided with and was ultimately

²⁷⁸ A. Wallace 1956.

²⁷⁹ The Chinese influence prior to the incorporation of Eastern Tibet into the PRC and transformations induced in due course are the topic of several publications, such as Epstein 2002, Rinzin Thargyal, et al. 2007, and McGranahan 2001. In this dissertation, I will deal with the more recent changes which occurred from 1950.

destroyed by the emerging modern Chinese state, where similar processes were taking place. By comparison, Chinese warlords took advantage of the fragmentation and power struggles in the different Khams pa polities to win control over much of Eastern Tibet. Even the Khams pa self-liberation movements arose against the backdrop of Chinese reforms and their loyalties were often directed against the Lha sa government.²⁸⁰ In consequence, the modern ethnic Tibetan regions in Sichuan and Qinghai, which are the special focus of the current sections and subsequent chapters that describe the case study, have not developed the kind of a close relationship with the Tibetan government-in-exile, as is the case with the religious revivalists in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR).²⁸¹ The symbolism that the Khams pa revival operates with is much less provokingly nationalistic than the rhetoric of the dGe lugs pa, prevalent in the TAR, who alarm Chinese authorities with the religious-*cum*-political message of the Dalai Lama images, for instance.²⁸² Since the activities of the Eastern Tibetan religious revival give fewer reasons for suspicion of anti-government campaigns, they are not only allowed to flourish, but are at times even supported by the local authorities.²⁸³

IV.3. Strategies for survival, revival and continuation

The endeavors of revival are directed by what Arjun Appadurai calls “cultures of aspiration,” which denotes:

[...] the spirit of energy, creativity and solidarity, which fuel the capability to form culture and remember the past.²⁸⁴

Thus, a connection is assumed between contemporary effort and tradition, which makes it possible to recreate both its tangible and intangible manifestations. To some extent, this positive model of a post-traumatic survival strategy can also be applied to the Tibetan case, however, the link between the present and the past is never self-explanatory. It requires ritual reaffirmation as well as and the re-establishment of religious authorities able to perform it.

An offensive of a foreign state might imply that the invaders attempt to impose their social, political and cultural structures onto those of the conquered folk. In Tibetan areas outside the TAR that comprise the subject matter of this thesis, as well as in other Tibetan territories forcefully incorporated into the Chinese communist state, the chthonic culture was abhorred

²⁸⁰ Epstein 2002, Rinzin Thargyal, et al. 2007.

²⁸¹ Compare Goldstein 1998 b or Havnevik 1994.

²⁸² This is not to say that modern Khams pa nationalism does not exist, but is rather cloaked in historicism (Ge sar cult, reminiscences of the Tibetan empire) or in ritual symbols (modern gTer). See Germano 1998 and Terrone 2010.

²⁸³ Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2380, Terrone 2009: 96.

²⁸⁴ Appadurai 2002: 9-15 and Vettori 2006: 143.

as infantile or backward. The state planned to nullify and replace traditional Tibetan cultures with the Maoist, Han-directed ideology and customs. The endeavor to substitute the indigenous culture for another proved to be unsuccessful, and as will be demonstrated, contemporary Tibetan practices constitute efforts to revive the past, which is carried out through strategies that challenge authoritarian state discourse.

There is yet another possibility of theorizing the revival in terms put forward by Anthony Wallace. In comparison to the “cultures of aspiration,” Wallace’s article “Revitalization Movements” suggests a negative interpretation, i.e. that of a society as a physical body, exposed to detrimental conditions, whereas a cultural revival is seen as a necessary effort for effective stress reduction.²⁸⁵ In light of this explanation, the revival of Tibetan culture today can be seen as a response to the stresses of the violence of the Maoist era, the colonization, forceful modernization, and the crisis of ethnic, religious and to some extent even national identity.

A third model which is especially fitting in the context of Asian societies, emphasizes continuity as cultural paradox. Susanna Hoffmann’s analysis of various symbols linked with catastrophes brings up the example of Buddhist civilizations, which rely on cosmologies of a cyclic character.²⁸⁶ The view of the universe progressing through different stages of evolution, deterioration, inescapable calamity and renewal has also symbolically shaped Tibetan societies, as it was first reflected in the 9th century with the demise of the Tibetan empire along with the downfall of Buddhism. While presently, the native culture is reappearing again after decades of chaos and persecution, Tibetologists like David Germano believe that in the chthonic collective imagination, the Chinese invasion, colonization, and particularly the Cultural Revolution parallel the Dark Age between the 9th-10th centuries.²⁸⁷

Hoffman asserts that cyclical ideologies are not only fatalistic but that such an approach renders a society politically vulnerable. Since calamities, including a foreign invasion, are expected developments that unfold naturally within the traditional cosmology, oppressors become instruments of fate, or in the Tibetan case, *karma* – which leaves the victims powerless.²⁸⁸ While it is true that the People’s Liberation Army marched into a thoroughly unprepared territory, the lack of sufficient military defense should be attributed to many factors, among which resistance to reforms, political disunity and underestimation of the

²⁸⁵ Wallace 1956.

²⁸⁶ Hoffman 2002.

²⁸⁷ Germano 1998: 88-89.

²⁸⁸ Hoffman 2002: 134.

potential enemy played perhaps the most significant role.²⁸⁹ Be that as it may, prominent Tibetans, such as the Dalai Lama frequently present the Chinese activity in Tibet as the materialization of *karma*.²⁹⁰

Hoffman's ideas of vulnerability versus cultural continuity also point to another issue, central to the revival's religious component. One of the most crucial aspects of Tantric Buddhism is its uninterrupted nature, focusing on ideas like direct "transmission" (*bka' babs*) and "purity" (*dag pa*) of the guru-disciple link. Just as this bond is susceptible to corruption or breakage, the presentation of the reemerging lineages as an unremitting extension of the "tradition" described in the previous chapter, and untainted by the hostilities of the Cultural Revolution, has become central to both the self-confidence and authority of the revival's leaders.²⁹¹

IV.3.1. "The monster and the father"

Hoffman goes on to maintain that because cyclical belief systems unite the dichotomy of nature and culture, the imagery of historical calamities frequently incorporates figures, which embody both aspects simultaneously:

The destroyer is also the regenerator, as in images like Kali [...] where the monster and the mother are united.²⁹²

Here one can observe a remarkable association with the findings of Charlene Makley, whose research focuses around the contemporary Amdo region.²⁹³ In the course of her fieldwork, Makley observed how a particular instance of the vernacular language in Bla brang creates a conspicuous allegory of the Chinese state, employed by a group of her elder informants, who label it as "Apa Gongjia."²⁹⁴ "Father State" is a powerful, though impersonal figure, whose embodiment within the everyday vocabulary of Bla brang reflects both the sarcasm and the bitterness invoked by the state activity of the past and of the present.²⁹⁵

²⁸⁹ See Goldstein 1991.

²⁹⁰ It should be added, however, that these ideas are constructed retrospectively from the point of view of religious authorities and as such represent merely one of the many Tibetan voices on the Chinese communist invasion and colonization.

²⁹¹ Compare Germano 1998: where the author discusses the problem of *samaya*-bonds broken during the times of greatest atrocity.

²⁹² Hoffman 2002: 134-135.

²⁹³ Makley 2008 and 2007.

²⁹⁴ "Apa" is the local, courteous term, applied for male, senior members of the community, while "Gongjia" is a Chinese loanword for the state.

²⁹⁵ Makley 2007:123-126. It must be said that Makley discusses this issue also from the point of view of gender, whereas the state becomes a patriarchal agent.

In the Tibetan regions and in the diaspora, Chinese communists are frequently presented as the evil prophesized to devastate traditional cultures. Ironically, this tradition reemerges today within the setting of the new, liberal government policies and at times, even with the direct support of the “Father State.” The same father, whose destructive force was unleashed on Tibetan ground is the same authority that in 1978 generously reached out with improved minority policies and promises of religious tolerance, some of which were officially retracted in 1996, etc. This specific way to personify the state mirrors the vulnerability of Tibetans as political subjects strictly in the Hoffmanian sense. Moreover, it shows that Tibetans feel deprived of agency *vis-à-vis* the overpowering Chinese state and that a cyclic, “*karmic*” disaster theory might in turn empower them in a different way, i.e. as a culturally accepted explanation that can also serve as a welcome legitimation for the lack of military preparation.

The destructive work of Apa Gongjia began in 1950 with the invasion of the PLA troops into Kham, which only marked the beginning of the dramatic transformation period. The making of communist China included the coining of a national mythos of a “multiethnic” state, comprised of fifty-five minor ethnic groups under the leadership of the Han majority. Forceful assimilation of Tibetan territories into this new China ultimately compromised the political sovereignty of Kham pa states. Even if Chinese conquests were not unfamiliar in Eastern Tibet, this time the changes introduced by the subjugators were much more profound. Between 1955-58, radical land reform and the introduction of collectivization in Kham and Amdo irreversibly shattered the traditional socio-economic structure as monasteries lost the economic basis for their operation. In summer 1958, the Beijing Government embarked on a campaign for the establishment of people’s communes (Chin. *Renmin gongshe*), which further deteriorated the position of monasteries in Eastern Tibet, since lamas and monks were not exempt from labor in the working units and education in the political curriculum this entailed.²⁹⁶

By 1960, the time the “democratic reforms” had been initiated in all Tibetan regions outside the TAR, much of the Tibetan cultural legacy had already been lost. To provide an example, in the ethnic Tibetan regions incorporated into the Chinese province of Qinghai, merely 11 out of 722 monasteries are reported to have remained intact after 1958; after the Cultural Revolution, that number was further reduced to four.²⁹⁷ It was during the Cultural Revolution, between 1966-1976, that the most severe destruction occurred. Any manifestations of the indigenous culture, whether connected with the practice of religion or with secular customs,

²⁹⁶ Slobodnik 2007 b: 123-124.

²⁹⁷ Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 46.

were severely persecuted with the aim of eliminating the old ways and establishing a new order based on the communist and Han-centered ideology of the Chinese colonists.²⁹⁸ In the postcolonial scholarship of Asia, the particulars of such practices have been termed “China’s civilizing projects.”²⁹⁹ These projects were introduced with the a priori assumption that Tibetan culture and society were inferior and backward and as such should yield in submission to the power of the state, whose dominating Han majority presented the ideal of a people more advanced morally, politically and economically.

However, in spite of the PRC’s destruction and oppression, Tibetan identity never faded away. Possibly, the identity was even created as a pan-Tibetan phenomenon, first in exile after 1960s and then within the Tibetan areas of China after the Cultural Revolution, precisely as an effect of the oppression of “Tibetan culture” – a homogenous whole regarded as backward. Warren Smith claims that the failure of the socialist transformation (Chin. *Gaizao*) of the Tibetan areas originates with a paradox included in the Marxist theory itself, which had the Han communists believe that their emancipatory function (“liberating the Tibetan serfs”) preceded their role as colonialists.³⁰⁰

When the Cultural Revolution passed, the state reached out to its minorities with a number of charitable gestures. The nationalities policy of the state was first reversed in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping with the resolutions of the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party Plenum. The reforms were aimed at de-collectivization and allowed for more sovereignty in the areas of religion, customs, language and education.³⁰¹ Equally, the “family-responsibility system” introduced in the early 1980s and according to which households returned to their role as fundamental units of agricultural production allowed for economic development.³⁰²

As the Tibetans actively began taking advantage of the new policies, their efforts to revive their culture again revealed a close interconnectedness between culture, religion and identity, undoubtedly fortified and united through the suppression by the Chinese state.

It is also important to note that the key factor in the process was the survival of those skilled in remembering and articulating the power of the past.³⁰³ In Tibetan societies, that mostly amounted to ecclesiasts trained in upholding the different Buddhist schools. During

²⁹⁸ Kolås & Thowsen 2005.

²⁹⁹ Harrell 1995: 3–36.

³⁰⁰ W.W. Smith 1994: 72–73.

³⁰¹ Goldstein 1998 b: 10. It should be noted that China’s religious policy was reversed or tightened several times after 1978, but for the existence of a plethora of writings on the general topic of the religious policy in Tibetan areas (for instance Slobodník 2007 a, b, 2008 and 2011; Kolås & Thowsen 2005), I will omit it here and refer to it briefly in Chapter Eight in the context of political reasons behind the current popularity of hermitages.

³⁰² Worden, et al. 1987.

³⁰³ Compare Vettori 2006.

the Cultural Revolution, the state might have barred outward religious practice, but it did not succeed to eliminate it on the cognitive level of mental patterns and sentiments, and many Tibetans continued to live their lives as Buddhist practitioners either in hiding or in a concealed way.

Since the traditional religious elite were the ones empowered by the society to remember the old values, the very fact of their enduring existence marked the opportunity for a revival. Thus, they could become the social leaders of the revival.³⁰⁴ Their official reappearance on the social scene in their roles of religious teachers not only helped reconstruct Buddhism in the sense of complex systems of rituals transmitted by both clergy and laypeople, or through rebuilding monasteries, hermitages and pilgrimage sites. Their crucial role lay in the reclaiming of the unpolluted continuity with the past and the revival of the pre-modern, social-*cum*-religious structure of the local community. With the reinstallment of the monastery and the hermitage as traditional fields for cultural creativity and moral guidance for the lay population, the Tibetan “cultures of aspiration” redefined the locality. And in turn, lay people could provide the economic commodities necessary for the reconstruction and perpetuation of monasteries and hermitages.³⁰⁵ This also exemplifies Appadurai’s advocacy of solidarity in post-traumatic social conditions, an important revivalist factor as well, since it marks the return to the local model of cooperation – the mutual support based on the close relationship between the monastery and the village.³⁰⁶

IV.4. A “cultural diversity”

The post-Mao revival in Khams has arisen against the backdrop of major political restructuring in greater China. The “Economic Reforms and Openness” (*Gaige kaifang*) liberalization, the original factor that opened the prospects for a religious and cultural revival, also created the necessary conditions on the economic plane. Since 1978, agriculture is no longer organized into state-bound collectives and independent economic initiative is now permitted. Therefore, many pastoralists have seized the new commercial opportunities that lie in the exploitation of natural resources, such as increased amassing of curative plants and fungi. Originally a survival strategy of adaptation to the transforming reality and to China’s mainland markets, the demand for those natural commodities has had a great deal of impact

³⁰⁴ Compare Makley 2008: 113-133.

³⁰⁵ Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 54-5.

³⁰⁶ Compare Kolås & Thowsen 2005.

on the life in both nomadic and sedentary communities.³⁰⁷ The economic surplus created in rural areas of Eastern Tibet through the collection of *Cordyceps sinensis* (*dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*) has become an important financial factor supporting the present religious revival.

Within this politico-economic dynamic that enables the Tibetan invigoration lies the multitude of religious and cultural phenomena revived and renegotiated today. As Appadurai asserts, in a post-traumatic situation, when the processes of renewed cultural production take place within and among societies, cultural diversity is born:

Cultural diversity enriches the pool of visions which mediate the relationships between meaningful pasts and desirable futures.³⁰⁸

It may be that this quote best illustrates revival in a politically independent region. In fact, Khams pa Tibetans are putting effort into reestablishing their pasts as a meaningful answer to the official version preached by the state and more importantly, into reasserting their cultural identity while being compelled to limit their visions of the future within the rigid frames of state discourse and its minority policies. However, both traditional and new forms of diversity within Eastern Tibet seem to affect the current revival in different ways. The constructive and counter-productive play of these factors will be discussed as follows.

IV.4.1. Diversity as enrichment and a source of conflict

The culture of Khams had been heterogeneous already prior to the arrival of the People's Liberation Army. The area was composed of smaller kingdoms of a differing level of autonomy or independence from Central Tibet and China. Moreover, their decentralized political context encouraged the development of diverse religious schools and lineages, local customs, social attitudes as well as miscellaneous crafts. Today, as these differences are being brought back to life again, the non-monolithic reality of pre-modern Khams has become even more pronounced in the multiplicity of visions which may coexist or compete. Here, conservative voices are mixed with those of the modernists or reformers, and different agents of the revival might have various expectations, as well as diverse interests.³⁰⁹ The local, supra-local and global influences are also blended into a new concoction. All of those factors

³⁰⁷ Manderscheid 2002, compare also: Kunga Tsering 2007.

³⁰⁸ Vettori 2006: 143 and Appadurai 2002: 9-15.

³⁰⁹ For the traditionalist-versus-modernists debate among intellectuals in contemporary A mdo see Hartley (2002) who brings up the problem of defining the "Tibetan tradition"; while modernists are trying to cope with the internal and external pressures, many A mdo ba intellectuals have also raised critical voices in this debate. There are also monastic voices from Eastern Tibet that promote modernity: among others that of mKhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, an important revivalist and hermit, who proposes more education plus maintenance of traditional customs, including dress and language.

condition one another, contributing to the changing reality of Khams, whose culture has not simply reappeared, but as Goldstein asserts, is subject to ongoing transformation.³¹⁰

How does the diversity mentioned above “enrich the pool of visions” as appealed by Appadurai? Prior to 1978, Beijing’s nationalities policy did not allow for cultural divergences in favor of a unity upheld by communalism and a standardized state ideology. Since the ground-breaking congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1978, multiple visions for the future are allowed to be present, even if their scope is curbed by the Party-state.

In Khams, these visions coexist in various manners. They may cooperate, generating the cultural productivity mentioned by Appadurai – or they may compete. On the one hand this pluralism reinforces the importance of local discourse, which could be set against centralized state control and the standardization of culture under the leadership of the Han.³¹¹ On the other, cooperation is able to reconstruct old realities in a new way. Thus, reforms of traditional systems can be carried out or niches can be opened to incorporate the previously excluded voices.

Multiplicity of styles is summoned in order to help maintain the habitual structure of the Tibetan world, as Kapstein has it.³¹² Even if in the past, these differences would have been sources of conflicts, reviving local, sectarian and other differences in a new framework recreates the larger context of “a broader Tibetan identity.”³¹³ From the perspective of cultural diversity, the combined variety of religious trends reinstalled today constitute a factor in the revival of traditional identities, which can be resumed to contest the bodiless, but omnipresent power of the state.

The cooperation of these particular identities furthermore contributes to the revival of a universal uniqueness of Buddhist theory and practice, which not only resembles the non-sectarian movement of 19th-century Khams but is also a conscious allusion to its legacy. Through its persistence and popularity until the Chinese communist occupation, the network of ritual and social meanings that I referred to as *Ris med* has come to represent Eastern Tibetan religious tradition. *Ris med* is also especially emphasized today within the context of the new non-sectarian cooperation.³¹⁴

³¹⁰ Goldstein 1998: 11 and Kapstein 1998: 118-119.

³¹¹ Compare Smith 1994: 54 and Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 138.

³¹² Kapstein 1998: 145.

³¹³ Kapstein 1998: 145.

³¹⁴ Compare Germano 1998: 75. I have also witnessed an area where the idea of “*Ris med*” descends to the level of reconstructing local history; thus in today’s Khams, the non-sectarian legacy can come to represent very different phenomena.

Other revivalist trends observable today also reflect Wallace's concept of regeneration as an endeavor "to construct a more satisfying culture."³¹⁵ It seems that reviving Buddhism since the destruction of the Cultural Revolution involves a certain degree of reformist activities, as today's minorities within the Tibetan minority – such as women practitioners or lineages previously absorbed by larger schools – began to speak with their own, transformed voices.³¹⁶ These "reforms" are not always completely conscious acts, as Wallace's definition suggests. In her analysis of the role of Tibetan nuns, Hanna Havnevik has identified the Tibetan revivalist efforts as rather involuntary or subliminal, as has Mona Schrempf in her study of the ethno-religious revival in A mdo.³¹⁷ Whether these changes are in fact expressions of the deep transformations that Tibetan societies have undergone over the last decades or to what degree deliberate actions are involved, is not the point of this discussion.

The Tibetan revival also involves factors that had not been a part of the pre-modern society. Among the many supra-local influences, the most significant agents are members of the Han intellectual elite, exiled Tibetans and representatives of the global network of Buddhist centers. This renders the Tibetan revival far less encapsulated in the inner politics in the PRC as one might suppose.

IV.5. The revival and state control

The question of religious trends that have not reappeared through the Tibetan revival has been largely left unanswered in recent scholarship, perhaps because this problem is more complex than a reflection of ruptures in the continuity of particular rituals. These un-revived practices must be seen in light of the loss of significance of Tantric ritual specialists and their cosmology for both social organization and formation of individual lives.

Some of the manifestations of the ethnic and religious revival have become samples of state-orchestrated territorial claims. The government sponsors monasteries in order to control their activities and promote them in the role of tourist attractions; this is just one example of the emergence of a new commercial mythology.³¹⁸ State-devised endorsement of "authentic ethnicity," meant to provide an economic boost for the impoverished provinces of the PRC has skillfully annexed the markers of indigenous culture to the purpose of colonialism. Hence

³¹⁵ Wallace 1956: 265.

³¹⁶ See for instance Huber 2002 a. In spite of all the differences surrounding both the local pasts and the present revival in A mdo and Khams, I at times compare findings from A mdo to my data on Khams. Such parallels can sometimes be relevant for the fact that both of these Tibetan regions are located outside the specific historical and political context of the TAR.

³¹⁷ Havnevik 1994 and Schrempf 2001.

³¹⁸ Huber 2006: 22.

popularizing staged practices that have no cultural roots in the region, such as the “temple fair” or “ethnic villages” as mentioned by Huber.³¹⁹ Other examples of territorial annexation involve the promotion of communist and nationalist myths like the Long March within the historically Tibetan areas of the People’s Republic of China.³²⁰

The reinstallation of monasticism on the scale comparable to the pre-modern society became impossible as a politically sensitive issue.³²¹ Since 1996, in the wake of a government campaign, the number of ordained members of monasteries has become subject to regulation.³²² Exact personal records of monasteries and their communities are to be kept, their income and ritual activities to be registered. Abbots of these institutions are often state-approved reincarnations, embedded within political structures such as the Peoples’ Consultative Conference. In fact, all newly found incarnations must represent “leadership qualities” as defined by the government; they must also seek the final approval of the state.

Party authorities understand the social value of monasteries as authorities and crucial Tibetan identity markers. This is why monasteries are under constant scrutiny and suspicion of sheltering separatists and strengthening resistance against the Chinese domination.³²³ Especially since the 1996 “patriotic education campaign,” monasteries have been undergoing political reeducation, which may involve denunciations of the Dalai Lama or other Tibetan leaders in exile.

These factors have greatly contributed to the decline of monasticism and simultaneously, the great popularity of retreat centers. Terrone asserts that the weakening of monastic institutions by the policies of the central government and the regional authorities implementing them, have caused a shift in the local landscape in terms of traditional sources of religious power. For this reason, he finds that the less formal venues such as *chos sgar* or hermitages for group retreat (*ri khrod*, *sgom grwa*, etc.) have taken over the ritual and educational role of monasteries. Terrone observes that the growing quantity of these sites as well as the rising number of their inhabitants meets the demand for authentic, esoteric

³¹⁹ Huber 2006: 23-26 and Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 137.

³²⁰ Huber 2006: 26-28.

³²¹ What is more, there are substantial difficulties in citing exact figures and dealing with quantitative research concerning the ethnic Tibetan areas of the PRC. The problematic has to do with the inconsistency and irregularity of the polls as much as with the large discrepancies between the official Chinese records and those of the Tibetan government-in-exile. See Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 50-51. Nevertheless, it is impossible to overlook that numbers have considerably risen since the ending of the Cultural Revolution.

³²² Huber 2002 a: xxi and Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 84-90.

³²³ Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 84-90.

instruction, received from experienced masters in an environment, which can adapt to the needs of many.³²⁴

IV.6. Religion and identity in Tibet

Robert Bellah suggests that in many traditional cultures, religion set an important foundation for the formation of social relationships; contrary to secular ideologies, which focus on progress, the primal concern of religion is identity. Through offering answers to the fundamental questions about existence, the nature of self and of the world, and by codifying morality, religion offers a sense of stability and consistency, sustained by recurring rituals.³²⁵

In pre-modern Tibetan societies, the relationship between religion and identity has been very close. As many scholars have pointed out, the merging of Buddhism with literally every sphere of public and personal life became the main way, in which collective and individual identities were formed.³²⁶ This is why today's religious revival, as much as it needs to be perceived in light of suppression of religion by the Chinese state and its assimilationist politics that threaten the core of Tibetan identity, is furthermore an active attempt to reconstruct traditional identities.

As the anthropologist Catherine Bell noted, by placing a group in a shared ritual setting, the authority of tradition is invoked in order to reaffirm the sense of continuity. Here, tradition is understood as a particular number of references, rooted in the past; one specific collective is also distinct from another.³²⁷ Perhaps this is why authors like Mona Schrempf have analyzed the current Tibetan revival as "ethno-religious," which is concurrent with my own approach.³²⁸

Religious theory and practice are dynamic factors that define a self, society and its relationship with the world, both in times of prosperity and misfortune. Bell suggests that relying on spirituals symbols is a proven means to cope with grand social crises, like war or a political transition:

Perhaps the central function of a religion is to act as a cultural gyroscope, to provide a stable set of definitions of the world, and correlatively, of the self, so that both transience and the crises and life can be faced with some equanimity, by the society or the person in question. It is this stability, continuity and coherence

³²⁴ Terrone 2009: 81-84.

³²⁵ Bellah 1965: 223, 173.

³²⁶ For instance Schrempf 2002: 11.

³²⁷ Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 122.

³²⁸ Schrempf 2001.

provided by commitment to a set of religious symbols [...] that give religion such a prominent place in defining the identity of a group or person.³²⁹

In Khams, the great and renewed popularity of Buddhism today is also a reaction, resolving the individual and collective predicaments that have appeared in the wake of destruction, colonization as well as an abrupt and forceful modernization. The manifestations of perplexity and frustration, often understated, have often been compared to an “identity crisis” that spread throughout all Tibetan-speaking communities of the PRC.³³⁰

As mentioned above, the “civilizing projects” of the CCP, which dealt with China’s minorities (*minzu*) as inferior groups in urgent need of a cultural upgrade through assimilation with the Han majority, were designed specifically to eradicate the Tibetan sense of self-worth as an ethnic collective.³³¹ Marxist theory and Maoist practice in Tibet was to ensure that the general class identity would become the necessary replacement for ethnic, religious and local individuality, evaluated as backward and inferior.³³² Although this venture failed, it left a tremendous, collective sense of low self-esteem, fueled by the persistent Han chauvinism. The post-Mao reforms have yet augmented the dilemmas and challenges facing Tibetans today, e.g. a widening generation gap, increasing socioeconomic inequalities, growing consumerism in urban areas of the PRC paired with acute poverty in the rural regions and the radical reevaluation of traditional patterns of gender identity.³³³

As religion becomes the main antidote for the “identity crisis” and a factor in instigating social reform, frustration can be skillfully channeled in ways which remain within the field of officially tolerated discourse. This helps avoid ostensible political protests, which result in an interminable spiral of increased governmental control, repression and continued reactions on the side of the oppressed.

With religious tolerance, both sides reap the benefit of maintaining accord. It was a popular strategy in ancient empires that kept the various groups of the empire together, while at the same time, nationalistic tendencies were suppressed. Therefore, lenience on the side of the Chinese authorities makes it possible for Buddhist practice to flourish and ironically, reinforces both ethnic and autonomist tendencies.

³²⁹ Bellah 1965: 173.

³³⁰ For the use of this term compare Samten Karmay 1994, Kapstein 1998, Havnevik 1994: 262-263 and Bellah 1965: 2.

³³¹ Harrel 1996.

³³² The ethno-religious revival in Tibet can also be placed among the post-modern discussions on ethnicity, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. See Gupta & Ferguson 1992 and Radhakrishnan 1987.

³³³ Makley 2007: 130, Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 136. For consumerism as dangerous for tradition see King 1996: 411.

For many Tibetans today, Buddhism represents the value of their civilization and it recreates a sense of a shared culture, absent in their post-Maoist, secularized environment. This is one of the reasons why the choice of life as a monastic is increasingly popular among Khams pas. Havnevik believes that this phenomenon might represent a radical answer to the problem of identity. In her analysis, she borrows a concept of “role-blockage,” coined by ethnologist Ingrid Rudie, who uses this notion to describe a decision of taking up a lifestyle that entirely excludes other social roles. In the case of Tibetan monastics, “role-blockage” advocates the choice of an explicitly Tibetan way of life which can function as a possible solution to the “identity crisis.”³³⁴

IV.6.1. The revival as response to modernity

Encroaching modernity only fuels the “identity crisis.” Modernization, understood here as not merely progress in technology, but most of all, an abrupt and systemic “revolution in knowledge,” forms an entirely new context for social and cultural organization, compelling religious traditions to accommodate to the new environment.³³⁵

Industry, exploitation of natural resources, tourism, the secularized education model as well as new technologies arrived in the traditional society that was unprepared to face such changes. A sudden rupture of social conventions and values ensued. What is more, modernization brought about issues, which the pre-modern societies of Tibet could not successfully counteract. The drastic changes in the rural economy resulted in relocation or forceful sedentarization of nomads; consumerism and commercialism are currently on the rise, especially among urban communities throughout China; family ties are destabilized due to economically caused separation; redundancy amid Tibetans is increasing as a result of the great influx of Han migrants to the urban centers across the plateau.³³⁶

As for the new opportunities and commodities associated with modernity, they often remain unavailable to Tibetans. This is due to poverty, lack of education and inequality on the job markets, where Han Chinese are generally preferred over indigenous applicants. Even if the prospects of modernity were freely accessible to Tibetans, they are inevitably bound to the control of the system which had brought about these changes in the first place. The Chinese

³³⁴ Havnevik 1994: 263, emphasis mine. The concept of “role-blockage” is elaborated within the context of the case study in Chapter Ten in the sections discussing the phenomenon of renunciation.

³³⁵ Bond 1992: 11-12. Mary Douglas (1982) cited by Bond (1992: 4) presents religious cosmology of traditional culture as a structure which changes abruptly with the advent of modernity; also see Bellah 1965: 196.

³³⁶ Horlemann 2002: 240- 267.

and modernity are the two new opponents, which merge into one, as Tibetans perceive them as “extrinsic others.”³³⁷

All of these transformations are factors that augment the existential crisis mentioned above. Since the issue of identity is central in the religious quest, modernization becomes an ethical and religious concern.³³⁸ After 1978, Tibetans were seeking a way to revive their identity/identities in response to the Maoist project that had not only instrumentalized, but most of all, failed them. The ethno-religious revival is an effort of an alleviation of pressure as described by Wallace; therefore, I would postulate that the renewed Tibetan interest in Buddhism is a response to modernity.³³⁹

According to the Bellah, there are four types of reaction a religion can develop towards modernization.³⁴⁰ Given that the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist revival addresses collective emotions by applying traditional symbols, but also for the presence of nationalist and ethnic agendas, it would fit Bellah’s description of a neotraditionalist movement.³⁴¹ As Germano has noted, the renewed interest in gTer today accounts for a reemphasis of importance of past symbols and as such, acts as the indigenous response to modernity.³⁴²

However, I will argue that the central manifestation of Tibetan neotraditionalism is the current revival of hermitism. Since, as Gavin Flood has remarked, the essence of asceticism lies in “the internalization of tradition,” the case study presented in the subsequent chapters illustrates the great role that renunciates play in the current revitalization of the Tibetan religious heritage and ethnic identity.³⁴³

Returning to the scale proposed by Bellah – as it was briefly discussed above, the Tibetan revival, in addition to its neotraditionalist character, also seems to possess certain reformist traits. For instance, the urgency to put forward a successful response to modernity has caused the reinterpretation of certain aspects of Tibetan religion such as the role of women or the primacy of certain schools or lineages over others.³⁴⁴

For Tibetans, modernization and colonialism are frequently perceived as one. In this case, neotraditionalism becomes a tool for a restatement of ethnic identity and of opposition against

³³⁷ Germano 1998: 90.

³³⁸ Bellah (1991: 64) quoted in Bond (1992: 1); also see Bellah 1965: 194-203.

³³⁹ One aspect of reception to modernity in Eastern Tibet is discussed in Hartley 2002.

³⁴⁰ They are conversion to Christianity, traditionalism, reformism and neotraditionalism (Bellah 1965: 168-225).

³⁴¹ Compare Bellah 1965: 213-215.

³⁴² Germano 1998: 90.

³⁴³ Flood 2004: ix.

³⁴⁴ King (1996: 401-436), who seems to be using the same scale invented by Bellah, even argues for the dominance of the reformist element in the modern Tibetan revival, but her examples concern the nationalistic and socially engaged language of Buddhism in the TAR and in exile. Also see Bond 1992:13.

the contemporary Chinese nationalism with its model of one state and fifty-six ethnic groups. Such affirmation of identity has been observed in the examples of early 20th-century India and Sri Lanka, where the value of traditional religious ideology and indigenous world-view became the central concern in the Buddhist revival. Although different from the context of today's Khams in their development of political and social engagement, their reaffirmative activities were likewise carried out *vis-à-vis* the challenge posed by colonialism.³⁴⁵

Looking at the Sri Lankan instance of Buddhist reinvigoration, its initiator Anagarika Dhammapala (1864 – 1933) saw Buddhism as a “main instrument for a new Sri Lanka” and thus, he turned it into a tool for reaffirmation of the Sinhalese identity; however, with the acceptance of the role played by modern science and technologies. His agenda was similar to the cases of Tibetan leaders, which involved drawing on nativist and national mythology, pointing to the Buddhist origins of the Sinhalese.³⁴⁶ The second phase of the Sri Lankan revival was a surge of neotraditionalism (ca.1956) similar to the phenomenon observed in the Tibetan territories of the PRC today. Exit from community life and the return to the ideal of the recluse, advocated by the Theravāda elite, was an indigenous counter-initiative to both modernity and the values of the colonists, since both were considered immoral.³⁴⁷

The late 19th and the first half of the 20th century marked the period of a Buddhist renaissance across Asia, whereby most of the movements were dedicated to reforming the religious, but also the social and political spheres. Although India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Korea, Japan or Vietnam are often examples of public engagement, and not withdrawal from worldly affairs, they all present instances of opposition to colonialism, consumerism and social conflict.³⁴⁸ These instances are analogous to the Tibetan revival, which can be understood as a reaction to the Chinese dominance and colonial practice, the imposed Marxist ideology, modernization and its derivatives like commercialization and consumerism.

IV.7. Leaders of the revival

Just as it was necessary to reactivate Sri Lankan heritage along with the Sinhalese ethnic identity through reinstalling the traditional leadership of the clergy, as Tibetan culture is being revived today, it speaks through its religious experts.³⁴⁹ They are the charismatic individuals who actively represent the union of religion and Tibetan ethnicity. Their agencies in the

³⁴⁵ Gokhale 1999: 33-34; also see Bond 1992: 3.

³⁴⁶ Gokhale 1999: 33-46, 39.

³⁴⁷ See Bellah 1965: 121-3, 143 and Bond 1992.

³⁴⁸ See King 1996 and Bond 1992.

³⁴⁹ “Resuscitating the *sangha* is crucial to any plan to reconstruct a dharmic society.” (Bond 1992: 283).

revival are crucial, since they not only are established religious, but also social authorities, embodying both superior moral strength and Tantric powers that can expel the evil (such as the enemies of religion) – something deeply ingrained in the Tibetan mentality.

These role models are capable of formulating an effective response to both colonialism and modernity. They may exist in collective memory, representing continuation of the past through lineage and its authority. They also stand for the legacy of a moral paradigm; by way of ritual and social empowerment, they are able to articulate sentiments of the Tibetan minority as a whole.

In order to redefine the time and space for the process of revival, the new social and religious idols use certain doctrinal tools, depending on their school or lineage. These tools comprise a number of two-dimensional techniques that trigger the survivalist mechanism of the “cultures of aspiration” in the collective awareness. According to Kapstein, these techniques can be segregated into the three categories of history, geography and education, each one inevitably infused with Tantric rhetoric.³⁵⁰ They are appropriated as “skillful means” (*thabs*), important for the reaffirmation of Tibetan values. They reactivate the sacred landscape, re-evoke and embody the past and set a paradigm for the formation of identity. These three types of devices are most usually inextricably bound to one another as the gradual rebirth of Tibetan identity unravels within a re-constructed space and time.

As it was already explained, a religious revival does not always imply a crystallized, conscious agenda, claimed by Wallace. The following case study shows that most of the ethnic, survivalist and reformist strategies emanate from the resumed ritual activities and influence them in a manner that is mostly subconscious, unintentional and subliminal.

IV.7.1. Employing history

Arjun Appadurai considers history to be an important language of argument.³⁵¹ After decades of suppression, Khams pa Tibetans are rising to re-negotiate their identity on their own terms. The ways in which they are renewing their sense of cultural distinctiveness and belonging today is profoundly linked with the evocation of past symbols of power. Since these recollections primarily pertain to religious history, the contemporary revival bears strong features of what Bellah calls a neotraditionalist movement.

I will argue that one of the great challenges for the religious leaders of the revival in Tibet today is the reassurance of an unbroken connection with the past, as well as the validity of

³⁵⁰ Kapstein 1998: 142-143.

³⁵¹ Compare Appadurai 1981.

traditional identities in the shifting reality and uncertain future of post-Mao Kham. Here, the revivalists essentially appeal to “mnemonic icons” as Germano terms them – the historico-mythical figures of culture heroes or lineage patriarchs.³⁵² Through a skillful appropriation of emblematic characters like Mi la ras pa or Padmasambhava, who embody past lineages, their ritual and political power, the new leaders gain the ability to re-direct the collective imagination to the time when Tibet played a major political and cultural role in Asia and Buddhism flourished.

The subsequent chapter deals with an example of a religious leader considered to be a contemporary Mi la ras pa emanation, whose agency illustrates many of the aforementioned ways in which an empowered individual can utilize the resources of history – the advocacy of intact continuity, the usage of “mnemonic icons,” but most of all, the authority and efficacy of embodiment. I examine how the incarnation of a particular lineage patriarch, whose personal history mirrors the dramatic changes that have occurred over the last decades, transcends a replication of tradition. I will argue that this transformed body is a unique statement of reaffirmation of traditional identity *vis-à-vis* its degradation as well as an effective instrument for a reconciliatory dialogue between past and present.

IV.7.2. Re-awakening the sacred landscape

Tibetan past can only become reactivated in a hallowed landscape. A large bulk of its religio-historical narratives was not time-contextualized, rather place-contextualized. This is why traditional identities in Tibetan societies were often constructed around local centers of religious power. When Tibet became a part of communist China with Beijing as the midpoint, not only did Tibetans lose their historical claim to their native land, but more importantly, their territories suddenly lost their role as loci of power and sources for identity formation – these territories were effectively reduced to a periphery of that center.

This is why the need to reconstruct the old universe first began after 1978 with the resurrection of “place-memory” through locus-contextualized rituals like pilgrimage. In fact, Wenbin and Huber note that pilgrimage, although discouraged as a potential menace to the official administrative frontiers in Tibetan areas, was among the first traditional ritual practices revived in the 1980s.³⁵³ The role of sacred geography for the revival of the

³⁵² Samten Karmay 1994: 114-115.

³⁵³ Huber 2002 b: 113 and Peng Wenbin 1998: 193.

traditional society should especially be noted here, and as Peng Wenbin echoes Catherine Bell; pilgrimage process both contains and produces social and historical dimensions.³⁵⁴

The next chapters explore the example of a local yogin whose Tantric expertise empowered him to recreate the traditional cosmology of a sacred area in the historical Nang chen kingdom, complete with its spatial and temporal axes, its values and identities. At the time-honored spot, believed to have been consecrated by Padmasambhava as well as several deities, where the power of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school once flourished, the hermit established a meditation school and captivated the attention and imagination of both the local community and beyond. I will argue that when the old cosmos of sacred sites, Tantric deities inhabiting landscape, lineages of flying lamas, solitary hermits and their lay benefactors becomes restored in modern day Khams, a compelling offer to rebuild the indigenous sense of self-worth and the sense of historical coherence is created.

IV.7.3. Education in support of the revival

Numerous reconstructed monasteries, colleges (*bshad grwa*) and meditation schools (*sgom grwa*) across the Tibetan areas engage in transmitting "tradition" to the new generations. This traditional alternative is important to many, who cannot relate to the secularized, politicized and sino-centrist state education model.³⁵⁵ What is more, the training of future leaders is important for reemphasizing the collective self-esteem as well as maintaining cultural continuity. Kapstein asserts:

Where the national destiny is regarded as peculiarly tied to a specific religion, the religious elite also may become focal points of national feeling. Something of this sort has occurred in the renewed valuing of higher religious education in Tibet.³⁵⁶

Due to the renewed educational efforts launched after 1978, several Tibetan lamas have developed into renowned gurus and become tutors to Han Chinese disciples, just as previous Tibetan clergy provided spiritual service at Chinese courts. This is an important factor in restoring ethnic pride while Tibet regains its special place in its own traditional mythology as the source of Buddhist teachings.

One of the most interesting features of today's revival of religious education is its non-sectarianism. This approach was especially valid in 1980's, in the period directly following the end of the Cultural Revolution when Tibetan clergy first joined their forces together to

³⁵⁴ Peng Wenbin 1998: 187.

³⁵⁵ Compare Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 221-240 on Tongren in Qinghai. Costello 2002: 221-240.

³⁵⁶ Kapstein 1998: 143.

revive the collapsed lineages and restore the broken cultural continuity. The next chapter especially focuses on the example of Karma nor bu bzang po, whose Ris med-contextualized training in the pre-Mao days enabled him to transmit a whole variety of rituals and teachings to disciples of different affiliation, and in this way, to greatly contribute to the revival of the practices of hermitism.

IV.8. Conclusions

This chapter has provided a theoretical and factual framework for religious practices revived since the 1980s across the Tibetan Plateau, but especially in Khams, as well as to roughly depicted its most significant aspects. For all the uniqueness of this revival, it is also essential not to perceive it as an isolated phenomenon, rather to contextualize it within a broader framework of processes occurring in greater China and even on global scale, in view of the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism as a world religion.

The entire revival process in the Tibetan territories of the PRC does not simply add up to a collective effort to resume existence from that moment, where indigenous culture was brought to a halt and discontinued by foreign invasion and political domination. Rather, it should be understood precisely in terms of a reaction to this influence: the development of the revival is directed by the urgency to create an indigenous response to the recent eradication of traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution as well as the ongoing Chinese hegemony.

The long-term reaction of Tibetans to the process of introduction of the “civilizing projects” was a rapid intensification of ethnic consciousness, a phenomenon observable also via the example of other *minzu* of the PRC and inevitable as a chthonic response of self-definition and comparison to “others.”³⁵⁷

The concentration of ethnic awareness became possible, because Tibetan civilization had been able to survive both the constant attempts at its substitution and the destructive acts during the Cultural Revolution. That last and relatively recent historical period marked a succession of actions which aimed at the complete annihilation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, since China’s minority groups were a conspicuous example of the malfunction of civilizing attempts.³⁵⁸

I considered the current revival in the light of several theories, three of which emphasized survival, regeneration and continuation. Mostly due to the biological survival of individuals who had been trained to remember the past, tradition could be re-emphasized again through

³⁵⁷ Kapstein 1998: 143.

³⁵⁸ W. W. Smith 1994: 61.

the gradual reconstruction of society on the community level. Hobsbawm and others have claimed that one of the primary functions of tradition is to emphasize the cohesion of groups.³⁵⁹ This overlaps with Harrell's understanding of the first stage of developing ethnic consciousness, which deals with an awareness of belonging to a group.³⁶⁰

If many post-colonial communities are free to express their "cultures of aspiration" and to determine the modes of resuming cultural activity, Tibetans are not in power to design their future, and their efforts are limited by the framework of current state policies. However, progress has never been their major cultural concern. In pre-modern Tibet, like in many other traditional societies where religious cosmology plays a major role in organizing social relations, emphasis was laid on identity, the primal interest of religion. The focus on identity stands in sharp opposition to Chinese state practice, which demands a dedication to rapid advancement. Since the Tibetan collective self-awareness is tied to theory and practice of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the contemporary revival of religion is simultaneously a revival of ethnic identity.

Acknowledging one's own difference in relation to others is the second important step to developing ethnic consciousness. The CCP's "civilizing projects" failed in Tibetan areas also because they strongly emphasized and evaluated the difference between the center (Han/Chinese and Marxist/Maoist) and the periphery (Tibetan/Buddhist). This caused the dissatisfaction that Wallace compares to the distress experienced by a biological organism exposed to harmful conditions that compromise its health and well-being. Others have evaluated this anxiety in terms of an "identity crisis," stressing the aggravation and perplexity that appeared among Tibetans as a result of forceful implementation of government policies and Han discrimination, characteristic of state practice in relation to minorities in the PRC. Nevertheless, the revival of Tibetan culture began as a collective effort to alleviate the critical condition or reconcile modern dilemmas; as a native project, focusing on and expressing ethnic sufficiency.

Bellah has remarked that since it is a secular ideology, communism is focused on progress. The Chinese presence has not only brought the dominance of foreign culture and political thought, but it has also impelled the rapid modernization of life, understood as a complete transformation of the society and all of its endeavors. With its focus on traditional identities, the ethno-religious revival becomes critical for the Tibetan minority since it presents a valuable offer of life choices relevant in their present situation.

³⁵⁹ Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 25.

³⁶⁰ Harrell 1995: 29.

In one of his essays, Appadurai claims that history should not be understood as random inspiration of the past for present action, rather as a resource regulated by a variety of conventions set forth by a given society. In this sense, the current revival of religion is also a skillful reemployment of past authority to negotiate with the official historiography of the state. Here, religious symbols are used as a rhetoric device to reclaim the Tibetans' rights to their native territories and to contest their status as an underdeveloped minority. This practice is equivalent to a revivalist tendency which Robert Bellah terms as neotraditionalism.

The same author observes that in many pre-modern societies, certain factions of the religious elite remove themselves from participation in mundane activities in order to immerse in ascetic practice, prescribed by their tradition, and that these subgroups are held in highest esteem by the society.³⁶¹ The ethos of Tibetan clergy relies on renunciation, which is expressed even more effectively today, since the revival has triggered a vast hermitic movement. Neotraditionalist in basic orientation, the agencies of the new leaders are reminiscent of both earlier waves of Buddhist renaissance in Khams and the surges of religious revitalization that occurred in the beginning of the 20th century across Asia. Although Buddhism played a role that was more directly engaged in social problems of the day in Sri Lanka, Burma or Korea, all of these cases, including the Tibetan revival, exemplify the advocacy of chthonic values in the face of colonialism and decline of traditional morality.

Cyclic cosmology and stress on historical continuity, as described by Hoffman, describe attitudes and ideas concerning the vulnerability of Tibetan religion and culture. It is not so much that the Tibetan version of determinism creates passivity, but rather points to the inevitability of neotraditionalism as an antidote to the aggravated concerns of rupture. The "civilizing projects" of the state have not yet been abandoned, and the commercial interest in Tibetan tradition merely complicates the efforts for revival. Hence the importance of the new Tibetan leaders, the religious elite; they are the ones empowered to perform the "memory of tradition," as proposed by Flood.³⁶² Again, the society entrusts them with the ability to recall the authority of the past and to insist on a continual connection with indigenous history. Not only does this strategy render the roots of the native culture valid and renegotiates the claims for territory, but most of all, within the discourse perimeters permitted by the state, it restores Tibetans' liberty to determine their own future, independently of shifting government policies. Such is the significance of the schooling of a new elite, which centers around the symbols for

³⁶¹ Bellah 1965: 179.

³⁶² Flood 2004.

ethnic, historical and ritual power. The following section of this work takes a closer look at an instance of such a training facility.

In the supreme power place of Khams, sKyo brag Chos 'khor gling
[Exists] the oral tradition of flying yogins [and] the dharma [of their] pith instructions.
When holders of the lore of this lineage,
Rich with the wealth of devotion associate with helpers,
In the temple of freedom from delusion arising from the [accomplishment of] the four occasions,³⁶³
Effortless wisdom, free of all attachment, will spontaneously manifest!³⁶⁴
 sKu rgyal (b.1935)

V. Introduction to the Case Study

The following chapter illustrates the unique role that hermits and hermitages play in today's revival of Buddhism in Khams. In order to gain a better understanding of this role, I will analyze the case of “La phyi sgom grwa,”³⁶⁵ a newly founded 'Ba' rom bKa brgyud meditation school, addressed primarily, but not exclusively, to ordained women, who dedicate their lives to practice in retreat. La phyi sgom grwa is situated in an elevated, historically sacred area of Chab sti brag dkar,³⁶⁶ far above the sKyo brag monastery in what is today Nang chen county (Nang chen rdzong; Chin. Nangqin Xian) in the south-western part of Qinghai province. This territory was once part of the pre-modern Nang chen kingdom as one of its most dominant, semi-autonomous estates.

While the objective of Tantric practices (*nyams len*) – be it personal, historical or social – is defined as an ultimate state that extends beyond any particularities, circumstances obviously condition practitioners during their initial training as much as they determine their later activity as gurus. Thus far, this work has already illustrated how a complex of hermitages, doctrines and rituals founded or fostered in 19th-century Khams and referred to as the Ris med movement also accommodated the political, economic and social issues of the day. In the current chapters, I discuss the case of a contemporary retreat venue, also contextualized in a larger network, to present how its whole structure, even if it follows classical religious themes, simultaneously reflects and attempts to rectify the mundane dilemmas present in contemporary sKyo brag.

³⁶³ The “four occasions” (*gnas skabs bzhi*) are the special opportunities to perfect the yogic path of energy winds, channels and drops (*rtsa rlung thig le*). See Zhang Yisun 1985, 2: 1543, s.v. “*gnas skabs bzhi*.”

³⁶⁴ *khams kyi (sic!) gnas mchog skyo brag chos 'khor gling// 'phur shes can gyi bka' srol man ngag chos// rgyud pa de yi ring lugs 'dzin rnams la// dad pa'i nor gyi phyug pas grogs 'grogs na// gnas skabs bzhi yi 'khrul bral 'dus khang du// chags bral las med ye shes mngon 'gyur ro//* (sKu rgyal 1982: 3).

³⁶⁵ The facility should not be confused with the original La phyi in south-central Tibet, TAR.

³⁶⁶ Also spelled Chab bsti brag dkar.

Furthermore, the Tantric symbols and techniques used at La phyi not contribute both to its success in modern day Khams and beyond, attracting Tibetans from distant regions, Han Chinese and Westerners. The analysis of the case study will clarify how it is possible for this radical venture to appeal to individuals living in a secularized world where, as Bond has it:

[...] the tension between the sacred and the secular is shattered or unperceived, or where the sacred is allowed one room in a mansion seen as secular.³⁶⁷

As presented in the first two chapters, ascetic practice has historically enjoyed a great deal of prestige in Tibetan societies. Also today, as socially passive or disconnected as they might seem in their state of isolation, meditators are not only participants of the changing culture but are also among the key agents in today's ethno-religious revival. I will attempt to capture the essence of a meditative lifestyle with the term "renunciation," understood as the fundamental rejection of all active social roles, even those connected to religion, paired with the adoption of a lifestyle dedicated exclusively to Tantric training.³⁶⁸

Today, an act of renunciation is paradoxically, an affirmative strategy, which reactivates networks that have sustained hermits, their lineages, practices and retreat places in the pre-Mao past. It is these interconnections that empower hermits to reaffirm their traditional culture on their behalf.

The case study enables observation of how the reactivation of those support networks is triggered, as well as identification of their functions and basic interests. One might wonder why both the lay and the ordained alike are interested in reviving hermitism at sKyo brag. After all, it seems to benefit only the meditators themselves, since success in retreat is rooted in rejecting the life outside the boundaries of the hermitage. By analyzing the lay presence at and support for La phyi, one begins to understand why the very world hermits reject supports them.

In the course of the case study, the socio-religious phenomenon of renunciation emerges as a recurrent theme that connects the past and the present of the sKyo brag area. To a large extent, the religious and political history of the region was dominated by figures of powerful ascetics; as a project essentially neotraditionalist in nature, the meditation school of La phyi also depends on its past. It does so not only by drawing inspiration from earlier waves of revival, but also by reaching for more complex strategies such as utilizing the potent symbols of former glory of this region and reproducing the life narratives of past hermits. Since all of

³⁶⁷ Bond 1992: 13 after B.L. Smith 1968: 84.

³⁶⁸ For additional clarification of this term, see the sections on renunciation in Chapter Ten.

these tactics are related to the traditional ideal of a renunciate life, understanding them and what they mean to Tibetans in the post-Mao and post-Deng reality of sKyo brag is very important.

I will argue that the contemporary examples of renunciation have amplified their scope of social significance, extending far beyond the sheer reproduction of past narratives. At sKyo brag and La phyi, the performance of renunciation combined with historical symbolism becomes the language of argument for the continuity and survival of Tibetan culture and its validity for identity construction today, *vis-à-vis* the recent, violent past of the Maoist era and the ongoing hegemony of the Chinese state. Investigating the circumstances of generating and articulating religious vocation at La phyi will shed more light on the radical choices made by the young renunciates across Khams today and how these decisions become strategies for counteracting their “identity crisis” as minority members in the PRC.

Furthermore, the reformist traits expressed at La phyi *sgom grwa* will be examined against the backdrop of other meditation schools (*ri khrod/sgom grwa/sgrub grwa*, etc.), which together with similar venues of mass religious schooling, such as the *chos sgar*, constitute an increasingly growing and socially significant phenomenon. I will argue that the complexity of the socio-religious role of today’s hermitages is also reflected in the basic contradiction underlying their constitution. They are designed for the most clandestine practices, performed in an atmosphere of tranquility and detachment, but at the same time, they are characterized by rapid expansion in the landscape, multiplying members and growing infrastructure. A closer look at La phyi facilitates a deeper understanding of the place of hermitages in the ethno-religious revival today.

V.1. Why La phyi *sgom grwa*?

Out of the eighteen *ri khrod* I visited in Khams in 2007 and 2008, I selected the meditation school of La phyi to serve as the case study for this dissertation. I made this choice for a number of reasons.

From the beginning of my first stay in Eastern Tibet, I was struck by the rapidly expanding phenomenon of meditation schools. I noticed a certain pattern that was repeated all throughout the Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Qinghai – large settlements of ordained people living in a remote and ascetic environment, focused around the presence of a religious leader, whose specialty was instructing in one or the other practice lineage. On the one hand, it was a lifestyle model well-known from the different hagiographies and historical narratives; on the other, I sensed that the mass-scale success of meditation schools in modern China must come

down to more than a revival of the renowned Tibetan religiosity. I was also intrigued by the quantity of inhabitants and the swift development of infrastructure in venues dedicated to a life of spiritual transformation in solitude.

As for the choice of the particular meditation school, the circumstances of the establishment of La phyi, its location and the spatial arrangement of this rapidly growing institution for yogic training in retreat provide good examples of the most important revival strategies applied today. As for the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school it represents, there exists no substantial research on this sect, apart from a few sketches on the very early stage of its development.³⁶⁹

Moreover, the history of the ritual territory, where the school was founded and its surroundings illustrate a potent connection with the former era of revival as well as with a more distant, but vital period in local memory: a time when hermits possessed not only religious, but also political power that extended beyond the vicinity of sKyo brag. For these reasons, the case promised both historical depth and opportunity for ethnographic insights.

Among all the examples of hermitic settlements that I have visited, La phyi was the most accessible for exploration of its inner and secret spheres.³⁷⁰ First of all, it was logistically available since the sKyo brag area belongs to the region of Qinghai where foreign presence is tolerated by both authorities and by the local inhabitants. What is more, the formula of this particular meditation school, with its open-door policy and the emphasis on the training of women, made it possible for me to become both a guest and a participant in the La phyi project. Finally, as a Buddhist practitioner in the kindred Karma bKa' brgyud school, I was graciously granted direct access to the most clandestine Tantric techniques perpetrated at the hermitage, which are generally not shared with occasional visitors.

The entire training ground at the foot of the Chab sti mountain is a complex that encompasses three types of retreat. The first is the *sgom grwa* – i.e. a facility characterized by a non-commitment policy, open to anyone with or without prior Buddhist education as long as the person is a woman and ordained or ready to take the vows here. The second type of retreat present here is the sealed three-year seclusion in the *sgrub khang*, which accommodates men. The third is solitary training.

Out of these three types of meditation training, I will be devoting most attention to the life in the open sphere of the *sgom grwa*, since the *sgrub khang* is not accessible to anyone but a meditation teacher (*sgrub dpon*) and an assistant (*sgrub g.yog*). As for the solitary practice, no

³⁶⁹ See Gruschke 2004: 141.

³⁷⁰ For the division into outer, inner and secret: see below in his chapter.

one was occupying the special cabins devoted to this type of retreat, neither when I arrived at La phyi in 2007 nor in 2008. The huts (or rather tiny booths) were the abodes of former disciples and provided potential trainees with an idea of what awaited them. Therefore, the term “meditation school” will either denote 1) the whole complex of various religious training facilities at the Chab sti mountain, administered by and established around the presence of one guru, or more specifically, 2) the dwellings of female trainees, who follow an individual, non-commitment program and inhabit individual huts.³⁷¹

V.2. Circumstances of the fieldwork

The fieldwork was conducted during two consecutive, three-month periods in 2007 and 2008. The first visit was a reconnaissance expedition throughout Khams, which took place in the fall of 2007, when I first learned of La phyi. Together with my two travel companions, we visited around 18 *ri khrod* of different types as well as monasteries and monastic colleges (*bshad grwa*). We inquired into living or recently deceased yogins (*rnal 'byor pa*), and were directed to Go che monastery of the Karma bKa' brgyud school, a venue established by the Zhwa dmar pa as important Khams pa branch of his main Yang pa chen monastery situated in Central Tibet, which was taken over at a later time by the Si tu pa.³⁷² It was here that we first heard of Tshul khrim mthar phyin and his project of La phyi in Nang chen area.

At that time, in early November 2007, we traveled to sKyo brag and La phyi for preliminary observation. This initial sojourn at the retreat center itself lasted merely three days, but resulted in many further and longer expeditions to trace back the life of its founder, his guru and lineage, as well as local history.

The second stay was in October 2008 and included three weeks of research at the hermitage; however, as in the previous year, the time at the hermitage preceded eight-weeks of exploration in the area, undertaken with the aim to collect background information and clarify numerous ambiguities. The two three-month fieldwork periods were devoted to studying the broader religious revival taking place in Khams at that time and helped contextualize the agency of La phyi's founder, as well as the hermitage itself within the framework of what I will refer to as “the hermitic movement.” The reasons for the relatively short fieldwork periods at La phyi itself are explained as follows.

³⁷¹ Unless indicated otherwise.

³⁷² For its history see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 217. Compare also the chronicle of dPal spungs which maintains that Go che *dgon pa* is branch of dPal spungs (Karma rgyal mtshan 2007: 619). Also see Gyurme Dorje 1999: 488.

Tibetan hermitages are remote and secretive venues, where visits from lay people, especially Westerners, are not encouraged to say the least – which is why hardly any ethnographic accounts of Tantric retreat practice exist. On grounds of the rarity of this material, I would like to disclose some additional information on the nature and circumstances of the fieldwork and explain its limitations.

Already during the first brief stay at the hermitage in 2007, my two Western male travel companions and I had been subjected to scrutiny by two senior monks, responsible for instruction and management at the meditation school. As a result of this examination, we were assessed as “genuine” in terms of our interest and engagement in the practice of Buddhist teachings. In contrast to a previous group of Westerners, who had been barred from staying at La phyi the previous year, this first brief contact resulted in the invitation “to come and stay longer” and triggered the tremendous support we received on the occasion of the second journey in 2008.

At this time, I was invited to occupy a vacant hut, which I shared with a male fieldwork assistant, a native to the sKye dgu mdo area and with one male Western travel companion. On two occasions, we were also joined by two other Europeans, whose film project focused on the recent cases of yogic practice and accomplishment in Khams. These circumstances became a factor in data collection, as the film team was allowed to document anything they wished. For this reason, several of my interviews with the founder and main instructor of La phyi, the yogin Tshul khriims mthar phyin, as well as with his disciples and supporters, were recorded.³⁷³

The four men were granted a pardon from the strict rules of “no males staying overnight” at the premises of the nunnery. From the guru Tshul khriims mthar phyin, we received a permission to stay for an unspecified amount of time, along with the access to regular supplies of fuel, a large bag of rice, and most importantly, any teachings we requested.

As for my own position, the lama Tshul khriims mthar phyin repeatedly insisted that I construct my own retreat hut “according to Western standards of living” and stay at La phyi to train under his guidance. He was adamant on transmitting Tantric instruction but made it very clear that in his eyes, my academic aim was a futile enterprise, which belonged to the sphere of worldly activities that he encouraged us to renounce. This posed several problems, which is discussed as follows.

³⁷³ The film report from our 2007 journey has since that year been shown at numerous film festivals across Europe and was released on DVD in 2010 (see Rodizio 2010).

V.2.1. Methodology and problematic

The fieldwork was conducted by means of interviews, participant observation and textual study.

The field research began in September 2007 when I flew to Beijing to meet Prof. Tshering mthar at the Minorities Institute, who kindly provided me with the initial contacts in the field. The demanding, though necessary task of finding interpreters thus became more attainable. From Beijing, I flew further to Chengdu, where our crew met and embarked on a bus journey, taking us through Eastern Tibet.

As far as the linguistic aspect of the ethnographic research is concerned, communication in the field was carried out with the help of different interpreters. I possess a modest knowledge of the Lha sa dialect and a fair command of Classical Tibetan. However, modern Lha sa dialect skills are usually not sufficient for fieldwork in remote regions of Khams, abundant in regional idioms, so much different from the Central Tibetan dialect. Therefore, it was important to acquire the help of assistants, native to the respective area of investigation. Nevertheless, my experience with the classical language became necessary in comprehending utterances that were linked with the gist of the research – Tantric Buddhism. As a layperson, the interpreter I worked with in 2008 was not familiar with the complex ritual terminology in his own language, not to mention the possible English interpretations thereof. Therefore, during most of the interviews cited here, we collaborated on the interpretation.³⁷⁴

Since there is no vocabulary to describe field research or a doctoral thesis in the Khams pa dialects, the purpose of my stay at La phyi was presented to all informants in a descriptive manner – they were told I am writing a book about retreat practice, meant for university audience. This caused some problems in approaching many informants. Especially the nuns I questioned felt overwhelmed with what they believed was a demanding task suitable for a male scholar. Many of the nuns were still reluctant to be interviewed even when I only asked them questions about their daily routine or sources of fuel. The low-esteem and timid demeanor of ordained women was something I observed frequently in other retreat centers of Khams as well.

Generally, for all the openness of La phyi's main teachers, as weeks passed, the contact with the majority of the practitioners inhabiting the hermitage became increasingly difficult. The initial barrier created by the fact that from the beginning, my research objective was

³⁷⁴ For the necessity to complement skills in the modern language with Classical Tibetan in field studies see Crook & Low 1997: xiii.

incomprehensible to most informants, was never surpassed; later, the distance between me and the La phyi nuns was only magnified by the privileges I was granted at the hermitage.

As for working directly with the founding father and guru of La phyi, Tshul khrims mthar phyin, meeting with any Buddhist teacher or yogin of his social standing for merely one interview can be a difficult feat. During our initial visit to La phyi, we were first carefully examined and assessed, before we could obtain a brief audience with the yogin, who had at that time entered strict retreat. We were allowed to see him under one condition – that we each vow to repeat the Vajrasattva mantra 100,000 times, (though we were not given any specific time limit to fulfill this promise).

During this first audience, because Tshul khrims mthar phyin was technically in retreat and did not receive anyone, he did not utter a single word. We were told that we could ask him questions, although they had to be related to meditation practice. There was no use in inquiring about the yogin's life story, since, according to his son and close disciple, Tshul khrims bdud 'dul, Tshul khrims mthar phyin “was beyond such trifle matters.” However, not one person from our small group had a question and we simply sat there, observing, photographing and filming the immovable, white-robed yogin, as he sat in his tiny cave, calmly gazing onto the horizon and working his *mālā*. He made almost no eye contact and did not even return the standard greeting with the *kha btags* shawl. He only interacted with our driver, who requested a small piece of the holy man's white robe as a token of an auspicious connection (*rten 'brel*), which he was hoping to use as an amulet against the habit of smoking cigarettes.

In 2008, my travel companions and I were more fortunate, since the master had just entered a temporary “activity phase” shortly before and was open to interaction.³⁷⁵ However, Tshul khrims mthar phyin was resolved to instruct me in meditation and was not particularly sympathetic to my scholarly goal. He repeatedly stated how “unimportant” the composition of this thesis is, especially in comparison to the Tantric training that he was willing to impart. At one point, he expressed his explicit disapproval at my research questions, which he dismissed as “childish.” He insisted that I was wasting my time at the hermitage and that I should request advanced teachings which lead to liberation and enlightenment instead. Similarly to the cases of other contacts between representatives of Western scholarship and prominent

³⁷⁵ More on the phases of the hermitic cycle of renunciation in Chapter Ten.

Tibetan teachers of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the lama was convinced that his primary role was that of an instructor and not informant, which eventually lead to obstructions in research.³⁷⁶

At this point, I realized the greatest problem in conducting fieldwork for this particular case history. It is true that I had been granted complete access to all levels of an elitist project, normally inaccessible to lay people, especially Westerners – but I only had very limited time to tap it as resource for academic work. I had been allowed and even encouraged to stay as long as I pleased, but it was also clear that this invitation included the necessity of a full and active immersion in the life of the hermitage, beginning with the taking of monastic vows. Leaving aside my personal unwillingness, accepting the rules of the Vinaya and the strict regulations of the hermitage would lead to serious limitations in data collection. For the time that should have been devoted to research, I would have lost the freedom of mobility and communication along with my independent schedule. Since the path of a renunciate involves turning away from all worldly ambitions, it would eventually mean abandoning the task completely; I was personally addressed with the expectation to do so already during the early stages of the study.

Germano has said that Tibetans “construct as much as they are constructed.”³⁷⁷ Discovering this has contributed to the difficulties in the research as well. While collecting material in the field, I sometimes had to put much effort into accessing certain facts from the lives of the leaders of the revival at sKyo brag and La phyi – my interviewers were so adamant to maintain what they thought would be the best public image of their lama, that several times they told me a straightforward lie or a “white lie”. Unknowingly, I stumbled across a number of taboos.³⁷⁸

Previous studies in a similar environment have managed to circumvent the issue of the researcher’s position or their personal commitment.³⁷⁹ For one thing, Crook and Low’s study of the lives of hermits in Ladakh consisted of a series of brief glimpses into their daily schedules and as such did not require a fundamental repositioning of their scholar-observer

³⁷⁶ I had similar experiences with many other lamas during fieldwork. Compare D.P. Jackson (2003) and Jamyang Sakya & Emery (1990) for the cooperation of sDe gzhungs Rin po che and Sa skya bdag chen with American Tibetologists in the U.S. in the 1960’s. Also see Qin (2000: 420) for the passages where the author is teased by the nuns from the monastery where she conducted her research for being “an intellectual.”

³⁷⁷ Germano 1998: 86.

³⁷⁸ The motives and circumstances of this manipulation will be discussed, since they are important indicators of how the revival is consciously constructed.

³⁷⁹ Or they met with approval and support for the academic cause, as opposed to the limited openness of the La phyi yogins, which merely signified that they expected that I take monastic vows, stay at the hermitage in retreat and in consequence, abandon the research. Compare Terrone 2010.

status.³⁸⁰ Qin, Tambiah and Salgado performed longitudinal fieldwork in secluded Buddhist meditation training centers.³⁸¹ However, none of those institutions (a Chinese monastery at Mt. Emei and two Theravada hermitages – one in Thailand and one in Sri Lanka) dealt with the performances of Vajrayāna Buddhism, especially those carried out in ritual seclusion (*mtshams*). Tantric rituals are extraordinary with respect to their intense focus on secrecy. Thereby, the confidentiality does not only comprise one's own subjective reality in meditation experience, but also extends to virtually all details of the practice – the technique as such, the scriptures, the ceremonial utensils, and all the more, the body of the meditator.³⁸² Even the privileged visitor/participant that I became was still barred from trespassing certain areas at the hermitage (i.e. the *sgrub khang*), where no-one – except the trainees themselves, their instructor and caretaker – was allowed. There was only one way into the enclosure – committing to a three-year period of intense meditation training in the sealed compound. Ironically, even if the La phyi director encouraged me to make this commitment, it would put an end to my academic pursuit.

I was fortunate that by 2008, my then fourteen-year period of relatively intense exposure to and training in the majority of the Tantric techniques taught at La phyi *sgom grwa* facilitated the entry to its isolated sphere.³⁸³ This was the main factor which not only originally determined my admission into the community, but probably also advanced the comprehension of all layers of the hermitage – from the outer level of spatial arrangement and ritual behavior of the inhabitants to the most protected sphere of the training itself. This is one of the reasons why I believe that even my short stay at La phyi might offer more insight into the role of Tibetan hermitism and its special connotations today.

The obscurity of the processes of Tantric transformation and the cross-cultural misinterpretation were not the only obstacles in conducting this case study on the premises of the hermitage. There were also extremely austere conditions, which magnified the fuel problem. Yak dung was scarce at such high altitude and even the small group of visitors that we were, was becoming a burden to the small community in the face of the approaching winter.

³⁸⁰ Crook & Low 1997. Another sequence of brief and passing encounters with hermits is described in Porter (1993). This book, focusing on Zen (Ch'an) practitioners, mostly describes the hermit's daily chores in terms of domestic work and self-sustainment.

³⁸¹ Tambiah 1988, Qin 2000, and Salgado 1997: 213. For Qin's portrayal of a contemporary Chinese Buddhist nunnery in a secluded mountainous setting, I consider her work as the study which resembles mine the most.

³⁸² Also see Crook & Low (1997: 333-341) where an entire chapter is dedicated to the issue of secrecy in retreat.

³⁸³ At this point I had also had some personal experience in retreat practice, even if the seclusions were never long.

These were the conditions that determined the conclusion of my stay at La phyi after merely three weeks. The entire period of fieldwork should be understood as follows: in 2007, I spent two months travelling through the different Khams pa meditation centers and when I encountered La phyi, I spent the remaining four weeks collecting information and material on its founder Tshul khrims mthar phyin and his guru Karma nor bu. In 2008, I lived at the hermitage for less than one month and then had an additional nine weeks to explore the physical, social and ritual spheres surrounding the hermitage.

To summarize, I realize that especially the time I spent within La phyi meditation school itself was relatively brief in comparison to other case studies. However, especially given the difficult conditions of such research, I believe that the material presented here will both reveal a glimpse into the intricacies of ethno-religious revival in Eastern Tibet and serve as encouragement for future study.

Collecting information about the area of sKyo brag and its current religious activities also included interviewing informants outside Khams. For this reason, I repeatedly exchanged correspondence and telephoned with 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud teachers living in exile, whose excellent command of English facilitated the communication. As for the intricacies of Tantric meditation and ritual seclusion, they were additionally consulted with several Eastern Tibetan scholars and lamas in exile, who had either been native to the Nang chen areas, versed in the practices of the bKa' brgyud schools or experienced in meditation retreats. Those interviews were conducted in the Spanish retreat center known as "Karma Guen."

Several historical and liturgical details were moreover supplied by Western informants, who became three-year retreat instructors in the French hermitages of the Karma bKa' brgyud school, founded by dGe 'dun Rin po che, the meditation master born and trained in sKyo brag's hermitages of the 'Ba' rom school.

V.3. Literary sources for case study

My field research in Khams also involved the pursuit of scriptural sources on biography, local history, and religious practice in the sKyo brag area and the broader Nang chen region, composed in Tibetan. I found that such literature was in short supply and moreover, randomly distributed throughout the region.

There are multiple reasons for the problems in accessibility of the textual sources. Since the 14th century, the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school was reduced to a local phenomenon prevalent mostly in the Nang chen kingdom in a greatly diffused state. The Cultural Revolution saw the final destruction of the sKyo brag monastery along with its library collection. This destruction

resulted in a rupture in the continuity of local textual resources, which had never been too profuse due to the *shamanic* background of the region and the school. While the revivalist efforts noted in the region since the 1980's have included the production and reproduction of scriptural material, its circulation is unsystematic; locating and accessing the material often depends on the strike of luck. For that reason, in spite of the written sources I did manage to assemble, I by no means claim that they comprise a comprehensive register of local literature on sKyo brag, Nang chen or the 'Ba' rom school.

The collection of scriptural sources was completed outside of the fieldwork with several Tibetan publications I obtained with the assistance of the Tibetan Buddhist Research Center. Additionally, Bardor Tulku of Red Hook, New York supplied me with further rare texts that inform about the religious history and current activities in the region of sKyo brag.³⁸⁴

Other textual sources emerged in consequence of global influences that reach places as remote as sKyo brag monastery and La phyi *sgom grwa*: its surroundings, history and religious activity are advertised on Internet sites. One of the sites actually displays photographs of the yogin Tshul khriims mthar phyin as a "living saint" of the area.

³⁸⁴ I also received information on the existence of a textual pool of manuscripts on the religious history of sKyo brag, located among the exiled Tibetan community in India. Unfortunately, this material remains inaccessible to me. Its uniqueness has been confirmed by Bardor Tulku, who in spite of his privileged position in the 'Ba' rom school, was unaware of its existence.

VI. The religious lineages, secular history and sacred geography of sKyo brag

La phyi *sgom grwa* is situated above the sKyo brag monastery and village, which is located around four hours (by car) away from Shar mda' rdzong (Chin. Nanquian Xian) – the Nang chen county center – and another five hours away from sKye dgu mdo (Chin. Yushu), the capital of the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Yushu TAP) in the Qinghai province.³⁸⁵ Historically however, the rural township of sKyo brag (Juela Xiang) is contextualized in a 'Ba' rom pa stronghold located in the north of the ancient kingdom of Nang chen. A careful study of the Nang chen annals reveals that the cultural impact of this nomadic polity was parallel to that of sDe dge, so it is all the more surprising that it has not received proper scholarly attention.³⁸⁶

Andreas Gruschke reports that in 1958 almost a quarter of the Nang chen population was composed of monastics; according to his statistics, this figure is “much higher than the Tibetan average even in olden times.”³⁸⁷ The modern Nang chen county is still among those Tibetan areas with the highest number of ordained people as well as monastic institutions.³⁸⁸ The leading religious sects are the different bKa' brgyud pa sub-schools, which constitute a clear majority within of the 56 monasteries today.³⁸⁹

Due to this historical concentration of religious activity, scriptural and oral sources frequently refer to Nang chen with the name *sgom sde* (“realm of meditators”) or even *ras tshang sgom sde* (“home of the cotton-clad ones; realm of meditators”).³⁹⁰ Eulogies of Nang chen as the perfect environment for Tantric practice are still prevalent in the area today.

Khams stod lo rgyus states:

At the time of *dharma*-lords of the 'Ba' rom [school], fathers and sons, [Nang chen] was given the name of “family of *ras pas*, realm of meditators.” The reason for this designation was the succession of cotton-clad (*ras pa*) lamas and their disciples, who during their lifetimes preserved the examples of bKa' brgyud patriarchs and wore a single cotton garment without distinguishing summer and

³⁸⁵ In the beginning of my descriptions of the case study, I would like to emphasize that unless the usage of the present tense pertains to general statements such as in this sentence, it will relate to the *status quo* observed during the second fieldwork period in sKyo brag and La phyi in 2008.

³⁸⁶ Compare Gruschke 2004: 103.

³⁸⁷ Gruschke 2004: 249 n.3, and Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2396.

³⁸⁸ Gruschke 2004: 103.

³⁸⁹ Gruschke 2004: 104, sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999. Gyurme Dorje (1999: 485) remarks that bKa' brgyud pa doctrines spread in those areas of Khams in spite of the onslaught of Gushri Khan in the 17th century.

³⁹⁰ The designations are used in many sources; see 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003, Tshangs gsar 2005, Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005; sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999.

winter. “Family” (*tshang*) is the honorific designation for the assembly of lamas and [their] disciples. [As for] the name “realm of meditators:” all men were meditators; all women were meditators. Since they were masters in good qualities and [meditation] experiences, they made [their country famous as] “family of *ras pas*, realm of meditators.”³⁹¹

For this reason, it seems to be no accident that the fame of the modern cotton-clad master Tshul khri mthar phyin manifested here and that the yogin chose a site in the former Nang chen kingdom to establish his highly successful La phyi hermitage. The following paragraphs will explore the past of the Nang chen region, formerly a vast nomadic kingdom, which united ritual and secular power as it was ruled by Tantric Buddhist ascetics.

VI.1. The kingdom of Nang chen and its hermitic rulers

Briefly introduced by a few travelers’ reports and acutely underrepresented in academic writing, the territory of the historical kingdom of Nang chen (*Nang chen rgyal khab*) was composed of a wide pastoral area stretching around the rDza chu (Chin. Mekong) and Dri chu currents (Chin. Yangtse).³⁹² Its existence is dated between 1230– and 1950; the dominion of sDe dge, mentioned as culturally prominent in northern Khams and vital for the emergence of the Ris med movement, was located to the east of the Nang chen sovereignty.

In the beginning of the 14th century, a clan called ’Bru seized the throne of Nang chen and their sons remained in power as *rgyal po* until the Chinese communist invasion in 1950. However, before the era of the *rgyal po*, Nang chen was governed by a succession of ascetics, whose proficiency in the *gtum mo* practice earned them the designation of *ras pa*, and who at the same time, were principal holders of the ’Ba’ rom school. In the case study sections, I will argue that the specific heritage of *shamanic* power gained through retreat and combined with worldly authority expressed at sKyo brag, the former power center of Nang chen, is reenacted

³⁹¹ *chos rje ’ba’ rom pa yab sras sku dus su/ ras tshang sgom sde zhes pa’i mtshan ’dogs par gyur/ ras tshang sgom sde zhes pa’i rgyu mtshan/ ras pa bla slob rim byon gyis sku ring la/ pha bka’ brgyud bla ma’i rnam thar bskyongs nas dbyar dgun med par ras rkyang mdzad/ tshang zhes pa bla slob tshogs pa la zhe sa’i tshig dang/ sgom sde zhes pa/ pho thams cad sgom pho/ mo thams cad sgom mo nyams rtogs yon tan gyi bdag po yin pas ras tshang sgom sde zhes byas so/* (’Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 2-3). Also see Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 13 and 373 n. 16. The designation is further elaborated on in ’Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 81-82. Compare the fragment cited above with Tshangs gsar (2005: 237-238) for his version on how Nang chen became famous as “family of the cotton-clad ones, land of meditators;” he claims it was due to the widespread activity of the ’Ba’ rom pa school. For the *ras tshang sgom sde* phrase compare also ’Jam dbyangs, et al. (1995-1997, 1: 51-52). This last source reports how the emergence of Nang chen as an organized polity was supported by the ’Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud hierarchy, which developed its many branches there.

³⁹² Gruschke 2004: 33, 103 and Marshall & Cooke 1997: 1590-1591, 2397. For a fragmentary map of historical Nang chen see Karma phrin las (1965: 80) and compare with Gruschke’s map (2004: 2), which actually shows today’s Nang chen county of Yushu TAP and as such is much smaller than the original kingdom.

today in order to pose the revivalists' own adaptation of the local past in opposition to the official history writing in the PRC.³⁹³

One of the earliest 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud pa monasteries in Nang chen by the name of sKu 'bum, lead by the master-yogin Ras pa dkar po (1198-1262) was described as the first institution in the region, which came to unite religious and political power as Ras pa dkar po, and Godan Khan formed a *mchod yon* relationship as early as in 1239.³⁹⁴ The Mongols introduced an administrative structure which secured their authority over the land; it was most probably in this period, along with the advent of Mongol executive titles, that Nang chen became divided into twenty-five pastoral tribes (*dpon khag nyi shu tsa lnga*) and eighteen monastic districts (*ri khag bco brgyad*).³⁹⁵

Nowadays, the districts are still discernible in the landscape of the former nomadic kingdom, since most of its monasteries and hermitages were rebuilt after 1980. The historical districts, each headed by a major monastery, are all said to have originally belonged to the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school, perhaps owing it to the early 'Ba' rom supremacy in that region.³⁹⁶ Thus, Nang chen grew to be a bKa' brgyud stronghold, and the 'Ba' rom school, which was to undergo a substantial decline in later times, became the leading force of the realm in the initial stage of its existence. Indeed, the rise, descent and successive revivals of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school have been inextricably bound with the secular history of the Nang chen area, especially in the eighth monastic district of sKyo brag centered around its major monastery. In the case study chapters I will present the contemporary attempts to resurrect that power.

A further consolidation of religious and mundane dominance of the 'Ba' rom school in Nang chen occurred during the reign of gSang ba Lus med rdo rje (1227-1292), the principal 'Ba' rom heir and disciple of Ras pa dkar po.³⁹⁷ After the latter's demise, 'Gro mgon Chos rgyal 'Phags pa (1235–1280) sanctioned Lus med rdo rje to exert absolute power over upper-

³⁹³ For the politicization of Chinese historiography especially in relation to Tibetan areas, see Schwieger 2007: 81-82.

³⁹⁴ 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 321, Tshangs gsar 2005: 235, 246; Karma phrin las 1965: 35, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 50.

³⁹⁵ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 20-21, Gruschke 2004: 105-108, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 79-87; Yudru Tsomu 2006: 37.

³⁹⁶ 'Jam dbyangs, et al. (1995-1997, 2: 88-105) lists the eighteen districts as follows: 1. Nyin dgon pa; 2. rGod tshang pa; 3. Be'u ri pa; 4. dGon gsar; 5. rNa rong pa; 6. sTon nag pa; 7. Zab pa; 8. sKyo brag pa; 9. Shor phu pa; 10. Phug pa ba; 11. Ro lo ba; 12. Shar pa; 13. rGe'u sna ba; 14. So brag pa; 15. Kho phug pa; 16. Ri pha; 17. Deng thog pa; 18. rDza ri pa. Compare Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 21.

³⁹⁷ Birth date after Matthieu Ricard: 1226. See "Chronology of Buddhism by Matthieu Ricard," at http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/Chronology_of_Buddhism_by_Matthieu_Ricard (accessed 23.08.2010).

central Nang chen.³⁹⁸ Since Lus med rdo rje originated from a locally prominent Tshangs gsar clan, the Tshangs gsar house came to unite both religious and worldly power – as 'Ba' rom pa lineage holders and concurrently, temporal rulers.³⁹⁹

The subsequent 'Ba' rom pa ruler in this family lineage was Byang chub gzhon nu (1254-1323), nephew to Lus med rDor je. The story of succession of this renunciate hermit is shrouded in legend; it is even said that Byang chub gzhon nu was in solitary meditation retreat, when envoys came to solicit him to seize the Nang chen throne.

The 'Ba' rom school had become subject to fragmentation already during the reign of Byang chub's guru and predecessor, Lus med rdo rje.⁴⁰⁰ Later, during Byang chub gzhon nu's reign, also the political unity in the Nang chen kingdom showed initial signs of a breakdown. Due to the pressure on the side of a Sa skya-connected power fraction, Byang chub gzhon nu lost control of the monastic-political capital of Nang so chen mo, won to the aristocratic 'Bru Tre bo house instead. Thus in 1300, the 'Bru Tre bo prince, the monk Chos kyi rgyal mtshan was installed on the Nang so chen mo throne.⁴⁰¹

As a result, twenty-four years later, the kingdom was divided into two territories of equal status according to the Sa skya-Mongol legal system.⁴⁰² The Tshangs gsar clan was left to rule over a fraction of the territory including several monastic complexes. Their sway over upper-central Nang chen gradually subsided and so did their complete independence from the Nang chen *rgyal po*.⁴⁰³ The position the Tshangs gsar house had in the preservation of the practices of the 'Ba'rom bKa' brgyud was taken over by the monastic-hermitic center of sKyo brag.⁴⁰⁴

In 1731, Nang chen was placed under the nominal administration of the Qing amban governing from Zi ling (Chin. Xining), but the *rgyal po* remained directly responsible for the political and to some extent also religious affairs in his realm.⁴⁰⁵ According to later reports, the Nang chen king possessed a varying degree of influence over the thirty-three "inner" tribes (*nang sde*) and the eighteen monastic districts. Since his rights were in fact nominal, Nang

³⁹⁸ 'Jam dbyangs, et al. (1995-1997, 2: 164) accounts for Phags pa's visit to the 'Ba' rom monastery of sKu 'bum in 1274. Compare Gruschke 2004: 29, 116. Also see 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 321-2; Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 19-20, and Tshangs gsar 2005: 227-228.

³⁹⁹ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 17-21, 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 321-322; Gruschke 2004: 29, 110.

⁴⁰⁰ See below in the section on the 'Ba' rom history.

⁴⁰¹ Tshangs gsar 2005: 262, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 63. Compare Sperling 2003: 10.

⁴⁰² Tshangs gsar 2005: 233-234. Compare Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 19-20; 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 49, 166; sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 332.

⁴⁰³ Tshangs gsar 2005: 256; Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 20-21.

⁴⁰⁴ See below in section VI.2.

⁴⁰⁵ See Tuttle (n.d.), "A Guide to the Use of Chinese Gazetteers for Amdo [Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan]," at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/img/assets/10223/finalgazetterguide2009.doc> (accessed 06.02.2011). Also see Gruschke 2004: 105-108.

chen was effectively more of a formal kingdom than an actual monarchy.⁴⁰⁶ The four, and later seven ministers (*be hu* or *be'u* selected out of a larger number of officials designated by the same title) directed military and administrative units characterized by varying levels of independence from the ruler.⁴⁰⁷ For the absence of political force that could override this complex network of local power as well as the lack of an economic superstructure, Nang chen was more of a federation of tribes assembled under the royal banner, rather than a more structured polity in the style of the neighboring sDe dge.⁴⁰⁸ The reasons for which the *be hu* associated with the Nang chen king were borne more out of a sentiment for him as “a moral and social institution,” rather than out of a recognition of his political leadership.⁴⁰⁹

Given its de-centralization and the concentration of the *sgrub brgyud*, Nang chen was a typically *shamanic* environment, which encouraged the development of hermitages that gave rise to many famous hermits. As I mentioned above, oral lore even eulogizes an ardent interest in meditation retreats expressed by some of the rulers.⁴¹⁰

When religious and temporal rule was united under the early 'Ba' rom pa masters, some Nang chen monasteries maintained the status of quasi-independent territories (*dpon tshang khag/dgon khag gsum*) until the advent of the communist Chinese. They were Lab dgon (dGe lugs pa), sKyo brag ('Ba' rom pa), rTa rna (Yel pa bKa' brgyud) and Zur mang (sub-school of the Karma pa).⁴¹¹ These selected monasteries were placed in the high *be hu* rank, received their own territories along with many serfs and enjoyed great privileges.⁴¹² This proves that in spite of the separation of the religious and temporal spheres in the 14th century, the political scene in Nang chen maintained many hierocratic traits until the middle of the 20th century. Especially the example of sKyo brag will be brought up in a section below, since the traditional practice of centralizing power within this monastic and hermitic center has had profound consequences on the revival of Buddhist activity in this region today.

In 1915, Nang chen fell under the control of the Chinese warlord Ma Pufang (1903–1975), who became the same sort of a nominal governor as the ambans, likewise ruling from the distant Zi ling. However, this did not alter the socio-political *status quo* in Nang chen,

⁴⁰⁶ Yudru Tsomu 2006: 37.

⁴⁰⁷ Sperling 2003: 12.

⁴⁰⁸ Tsomu 2006: 37; Gruschke 2004: 105-108.

⁴⁰⁹ Gruschke 2004: 107.

⁴¹⁰ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 227. The *Nang chen rgyal rabs* extols the religious feats of the kings to such an extent, that at times it is reminiscent of a *rnam thar* more than historiography; see Karma phrin las 1965.

⁴¹¹ Tshangs gar 2005: 276-277; 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 85.

⁴¹² Gruschke 2004: 31.

with the king presiding over the *be hu* system and the four semi-independent monastic estates. In fact, Ma Pufang only expressed real interest in controlling the commercially important town of sKye dgu mdo (which, for its historical position in Sino-Tibetan trade is largely known by its Chinese name Yushu) as he set up his administration in the town. Unlike other Chinese warlords in Khams, Ma expressed no intention to interfere with the local political scene or to re-arrange the traditional social structures in Nang chen.⁴¹³

During the reign of the last Nang chen monarch, the communist forces of Mao Zedong defeated Ma Pufang, conquered Xining and spread further south, overtaking sKye dgu mdo in June 1950.⁴¹⁴ After October 5th, Nang chen became the corridor for the transition of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to Ri bo che and consequently, to Chab mdo.⁴¹⁵ The transfer of power from local rulers to the Chinese communists was a process that began with the incorporation of old power structures into the superstructure of the new People's Republic of China. Thus, 1951 saw the establishment of the "Tibetan People's Autonomous Prefecture of Yushu or Upper Khams" (*Khams stod dam yu shul bod rigs sa khongs rang skyong*) with the former king bKra shis tshe dbangs stobs rgyal as its head.⁴¹⁶

In 1956-58, the unavoidable reforms of collectivization swept across Khams. In Nang chen, a largely pastoral area, they were especially difficult to accept, since they required a fundamental change in lifestyle, as all nomadic herdsmen were forced to settle "in order to facilitate socialist transformation and socialist collectivization."⁴¹⁷ As a result, also the old *be hu* system was finally eliminated. Public dissention at the devastation of local economy, the socio-political structure and traditional ways of living erupted in an extensive revolt, which occurred between spring and winter that year, involving some 2.000-3.000 Tibetans across Khams. In the effort to bring the revolt under control, the PLA destroyed several monasteries in old Nang chen, executed some of their reincarnate lamas and finally closed down all religious institutions in the Yushu TAP until late 1970s.⁴¹⁸

Today, modern maps of the gigantic, multi-ethnic Chinese state delineate a kingdom once ruled by master hermits, lamas and powerful clansmen, fostered by emperors and kings. As a memento of the former glory of Nang chen and perhaps also its travesty, new maps of the

⁴¹³ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 226, Gruschke 2004: 17, 31-32, Marshall & Cooke 1997: 1593, 2375 and D.P. Jackson 2003: 523.

⁴¹⁴ Marshall & Cooke 1997: 1593, Gruschke 2004: 33.

⁴¹⁵ Marshall & Cooke 1997: 682.

⁴¹⁶ 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 211, Gruschke 2004: 33.

⁴¹⁷ W.W. Smith 1994: 65.

⁴¹⁸ Gruschke 2004: 33-4, Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2400, 2404; 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 213 and Yan Chia-ming 2006: 9.

PRC indicate a mere fraction of this historical territory by the same name. However, the modern meaning of the expression “Nang chen” pertains to nothing more but an impoverished and remote county of Nangqen, located in the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in the southwest of the Qinghai province, People’s Republic of China.⁴¹⁹

VI.2. A brief history of the ‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud school

Eliot Sperling notes that “no history of Nang chen can be written without acknowledging the presence and impact of the ‘Ba’-rom-pa.”⁴²⁰ I have already delineated that at least until the 14th century, the kingdom’s religious and political affairs were represented by yogins accomplished in the *gtum mo*. What is more, in order to understand our case study of a ‘Ba’ rom pa hermitage, it is also essential to briefly account for the progression of the school itself, which reached its zenith in the 13th century, but then experienced a gradual decline and loss of identity, only to undergo successive waves of revival in the 19th century and today.⁴²¹

The ‘Ba’ rom school originated with Dar ma dBang phyug (1127-1200), disciple to sGam po pa. Dar ma dBang phyug is said to have founded several monasteries in Khams.⁴²² His principal successor was the above-mentioned Ti shri ras pa Shes rab seng ge (1164-1236).⁴²³ In 1206, as he visited the neighboring Tangut (Xia Xia) realm, the monarch bestowed on him the title of imperial preceptor (Chin. *ti shih*).⁴²⁴ Ti shri ras pa was active in Xia Xia for over thirty years, establishing several monasteries. ‘Ba’ rom pa history writing extols him as a *shamanic* master, a renunciate dressed in the single white robe of a *gtum mo* virtuoso, who nevertheless performed a *clerical* function at the Tangut court.⁴²⁵ His versatile spiritual

⁴¹⁹ The above material on Nang chen is an extract of a more extensive study that I have managed to carry out mostly with the help of reprints of rare literature obtained in the field. Since it exceeds the scope of this thesis, it will be published elsewhere. It would also be interesting to examine the links between sDe dge and Nang chen, which seemed to concentrate much of the activity of the practice lineages throughout the last centuries.

⁴²⁰ Sperling 2003: 7- 12.

⁴²¹ The scholarship on the development and contemporary situation of the ‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud pa school is underdeveloped, to say the least. The very few existing examples of writings describe the life of the first patriarchs, briefly outline their relationship with the Tangut emperors or present a loose collection of anecdotes passed on orally in the Nang chen region. What is more, in comparison with the literature of a larger and more widespread school, for instance ‘Ba’ rom pa mentor-institution, the Karma bKa’ brgyud, scriptures containing any information on the ‘Ba’ rom pa are extremely scarce and difficult to obtain; they may at times contain corruptions or contradictions.

⁴²² See Puchung Tsering 2001: 95-97.

⁴²³ A quite extensive biography of this master in Tshangs gsar 2005:197-218.

⁴²⁴ Puchung Tsering 2001: 12, Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 14-17, Sperling 1987: 31-50, sKu rgyal 1982: 29 and ‘Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997,1: 158. It should also be noted that this occurred long before Ti shri ras pa’s more renowned contemporary, Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) took a similar function at the court of Godan Khan (1215-1294). Thus Ti shri ras pa was one of the first Tibetan teachers ever to begin the *mchod yon* relationship of Tibetan religious preceptors with powerful political rulers.

⁴²⁵ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 14-17. Also see Gruschke 2004: 109-110. For the white robe see the sections on the *gtum mo* yoga and *ras pas* in the current work.

background was reflected in the construction of a five-peaked ceremonial hat (*dbu zhwa rtse lnga*), which commemorated his five principal gurus and is still emblematic for the 'Ba' rom hierarchy today.⁴²⁶

Ti shri ras pa's successor was sPyan lnga Ras pa dkar po (1198-1262).⁴²⁷ Ras pa dkar po combined yogic abilities with mundane authority like his own master, when he secured his absolute control of the Nang chen area.⁴²⁸ Especially his decision to erect the monastery of sKu 'bum was strategically important for creating a basis from which 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud could flourish. Hence, the institution is referred to as the "'Ba' rom root [monastery]" (*'Ba' rom rtsa*). It was here that Ras pa dkar po received Godan Khan's general, Dorta; it was also at sKu 'bum that Ras pa dkar po's main disciple, gSang ba Lus me rdo rje (1227-1292) was enthroned by Phags pa as an absolute head of both religious and secular affairs of the kingdom.

For all his power, Lus med rdo rje was not able to secure the transfer of authority to a single power holder, and as a result, not only the Nang chen realm suffered a political crisis, but also the 'Ba' rom school underwent fragmentation merely two hundred years after its establishment.

It all began when Lus med rdo rje left as many as four principal successors.⁴²⁹ With each generation, these four principal lineages became divided into sub-levels, and as the consecutive disciples became masters themselves and founded new *dgon pa*, the decentralization continued. "The 'Ba' rom root and branches" (*'Ba' rom rtsa lag*), as this broad structure is referred to, could have been a favorable development to ensure expansion, if not for the fact that no single, principal lineage holder was appointed, no central incarnation lineage ever developed. Since the irreversible destruction of sKu 'bum by the Be ri army in 1630s, there was not even a main monastic venue that could focus on the preservation of 'Ba' rom school.⁴³⁰

Therefore, it was the early lack of centralization that became the main cause for the descent of the 'Ba' rom pa.⁴³¹ Adding the ties with the potent Karma bKa' brgyud pa, which on one

⁴²⁶ Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 14 and 374, n. 18. Also see sKu rgyal 1982: 32-33; Tshangs gsar 2005: 207-208 and Puchung Tsering 2001: 13.

⁴²⁷ Dates according to 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 38-41. Compare: Gruschke 2004:110.

⁴²⁸ For the *gtum mo* skills of this political leader see sKu rgyal 1982: 35.

⁴²⁹ Compare Tshangs gsar 2005: 230-234, 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 231-232 and sKu rgyal 1982: 38.

⁴³⁰ For the destruction of sKu 'bum see Gruschke 2004: 110. It seems it occurred in 1634: see 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 171.

⁴³¹ As opposed to other theories, like attributing the decline to the recent excesses of the Cultural Revolution (Puchung Tsering 2001).

hand lent the 'Ba' rom school much of its influence, but on the other, increasingly destabilized its doctrinal independence, it is easy to comprehend why the 'Ba' rom school was facing extinction by the 19th century.⁴³²

From a historical perspective, it is apparent that the two centers that upheld the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud teachings for the longest time were the Tshangs gsar clan and the sKyo brag center. The religious function upheld by the House of Tshangs gsar has already been mentioned, including their ultimate shift of focus from the 'Ba' rom teachings to the *mChog gling gter gsar*. The sKyo brag developments will be discussed below in greater detail, since it is this center that currently plays a leading role in the propagation of the 'Ba' rom school, and it is sKyo brag's immediate proximity to La phyi *sgom grwa* that defines the growth of this hermitage, the case study of this thesis.

VI.2.1. sKyo brag – the 'Ba' rom final frontier

The village of sKyo brag (Chin. Juela Xiang) and its monastic-hermitic center by the name of sKyid 'byams thub bstan dar rgyas gling is situated on the river rDza chu in the very north of the old Nang chen kingdom and in the north of today's Nangqian county. Although a road connects it with the county's capital of Shar mda' (Chin. Nangqian), today the area is more of a wilderness, located on an elevated plain, surrounded by mountains and grasslands to its northwestern and southern peripheries.

It is said that a whole century before sKyo brag had become a focal point of religious life in the area, its potential as *gnas* was said to have been recognized by Ti shri ras pa himself, who is also attributed with the authorship of the oldest inventory guide (*gnas yig*) to this sacred spot.⁴³³ However uncertain the real origin of this scripture is, it links the first opening of the power place (*gnas sgo 'byed pa*) with that particular 'Ba' rom pa patriarch⁴³⁴ and simultaneously, inaugurates the sKyo brag area as venue blessed by Padmasambhava and other lamas and deities, preferably of the bKa' brgyud denomination. What is more, through the legacy of Ti shri ras pa, the *gnas* becomes contextualized within the network of the most famous Tibetan power places, such as Gangs Ti se or Cāritra.⁴³⁵

In this respect, the sKyo brag *gnas* along with its branches is a good example of Andrew Quintman's "contested place" which was covered in the discussion of the Ris med

⁴³² Kong sprul reportedly expressed the wish to restore the practices of the 'Ba' rom school. See Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 166.

⁴³³ Ti shri ras pa 2003.

⁴³⁴ Compare Gruschke (2004: 133) where the author even claims that Ti shri ras pa died at sKyo brag.

⁴³⁵ dPa' brtan 2003: 10.

movement's conquest of power places in Chapter Three. Two major streams of influence have been competing for dominance here: the rNying ma school, especially through its gTer ma sub-current – and the bKa' brgyud schools of 'Ba' rom pa and Karma pa. This rivalry may have only been a scriptural, ritual and symbolic one, and at times attempts would appear to combine the different influences – nevertheless, the variety of doctrinal references have left its trace on the sacred ground, in the way that is still visible and actively recalled today.⁴³⁶

The status of sKyo brag as *gter gnas* predates even the “opening” by Ti shri ras pa, since local sources quote prophesies dating back to Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (1136-1204).⁴³⁷ Another *gter ston*, Ratna gling pa (1403-1478) describes the site with greater detail.⁴³⁸ These visions have influenced the local oral tradition, in which the two descriptions have merged together into one. The ideas of these *gter stons* ma laid a blueprint on the sacred ground of sKyo brag and its descriptions, which would be expanded by subsequent visionaries.

In the 19th century, mChog gyur gling pa's revelation of the twenty-five power places of A mdo and Khams placed sKyo brag and its branch (*yan lag*) of sPyi 'byams (or sKyi 'byams) on this important narrative map in the two very first positions. Consequently, the descriptions contained in the *mChog gling gter gsar* have become both a standard way to relate to the *gnas*, as well as a basis for the contemporary oral reports. From mChog gling's narrative map of twenty-five power places of A mdo and Khams:

[The area of] the so-called sKyo resembles a conch [-colored] lion leaping into space. The central point of the power place is called Seng ge rDzong. I, O rgyan Padma, practiced for three months [at this site]. At the entrance of the cave there are signs of accomplishment, [my] footprints. At the rock on the right side dwells Mahākāruṇika, at the rock on the left dwells Vajravārāhī. The right side, the left side and the center [together] abide in the manner of the syllable *Om*. [At this place] I concealed three Treasures, [which will become] necessary for all of Tibet. For each [of these three], I concealed twenty Treasures of power (*dbang po'i gter*); I [also] concealed ten Treasures suitable for extraction by whoever wishes [them]. What concerns the presentation of the supreme Buddha-body power place of the body, one year long I practiced without break at a part of the cliff called sKyi, at the cave [named] Nyi zla. Above it is the palace of a black *nāgā*-demon. In the future, at this supreme site, [an individual known by] the name of Grags pa will appear and at that time, pay great reverence to this site. A black *stūpa* I erected [there] will crack, and from underneath black relic-pills (*ril bu*) will come out. The leaders of perturbed Tibet and Khams will then come to harm. For their benefit, I concealed a clay *stūpa* in a black pyrite [rock wall], eight spans of an arrow-[flight]

⁴³⁶ All of these issues will be addressed in subsequent sections.

⁴³⁷ sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 14-15.

⁴³⁸ 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 54.

from there. When this is evident, the *stūpa* will be repaired. The being who extracts it will be called Grub.⁴³⁹

The huge, white-grayish boulder of sPyi 'byams is an eerie labyrinth of caves. One of them, hardly accessible since it opens right above the surface of the rDza chu, is the famous Seng ge gnam rdzong (because it resembles the gaping mouth of a lion). Another, situated on the other side, is Nyi zla phug, the cave actively used for retreat and pilgrimage again today.⁴⁴⁰ Local lamas and lay people still recount the vivid tales, which left a lasting imprint on the extraordinary landscape of the sPyi 'byams cliff, located by the bend of the rDza chu river overlooking a vast plain of marshes and pastures. The boulder itself is situated right outside the sKyo brag village and several minutes away from the monastery grounds.

The monastic center was founded in 1361 by Glang ras pa Grags pa rgyal mtshan, as if fulfilling of the prophesy of Padmasambhava quoted above.⁴⁴¹ This master was a native of sKyo brag and disciple of sTong nag ras pa Blo gros rdo rje.⁴⁴² He was born in 1337, and had been predicted by *gter ston* Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer as an emanation (*sprul pa*) of Vajradhāra; others saw him as Sa ra ha or Mañjuśrī.⁴⁴³ His gurus were cotton-clad hermits, some of which ruled over half of Nang chen's domain.⁴⁴⁴

Glang ras pa had been living the life of a hermit in the different caves of the sKyo brag region for twenty years when he had a special vision, which he understood as message indicating that he should found a monastery at the location of his apparition.⁴⁴⁵ Thus, in 1361, with financial support coming from the Yuan court, he erected an impressive temple and monastery complex.⁴⁴⁶

⁴³⁹ *skyo zhes bya ba dung seng gnam mchongs 'dra% gnas kyi lte ba seng ge rdzong zhes bya% o rgyan padma bdag gis zla gsum sgrubs% phug pa'i sgo ru sgrub rtag zhabs rjes yod% gyas kyi brag la thugs rje chen po dang% gyon gyi brag la rdo rje phag mo zhugs% gyas gyon dbu gsum om gyi tshul du gnas% bod yul spyi la dgos pa'i gter gsum sbas% so sor dbang po'i gter kha nyi shu sbas% gang 'dod 'don par rung ba'i gter bcu sbas% sku yi sku yi gnas mchog bstan pa ni% skyi zhes bya ba brag de mi 'chad pa ru% bdag gi lo gcig sgrub gnas nyi zla phug% klu bdud nag po'i pho brang steng du yod% ma ongs dus su gnas mchog 'di nyid su% grags pa'i ming 'byung de dus bskur sti byed% bdag gis bzhengs pa'i mchod rtan nag po de% ral zhing og nas ril bu nag po 'byung% bod khams phung pa'i mgo bo de nas tshug% de la phan phyir de nas mda' rgyangs brgyad% pha wang nag por rdza yi mchod rten sbas% de nyid thon nas mchod rten zhig gso bya% 'don pa'i skyes bu grub ces bya 'byung% (mChog gyur gling pa 1977: fols. 7-9).*

⁴⁴⁰ Also see dPa' brtan 2003: 59-65.

⁴⁴¹ Date according to "Chodrak Monastery," at <http://www.baromkagyu.org/pageBK3.html> (accessed 24.10.2010).

⁴⁴² See sKu rgyal 1982: 38, Tshangs gsar 2005: 288-290 and 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997,2: 92.

⁴⁴³ sKu rgyal 1982: 39, sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 294.

⁴⁴⁴ sKu rgyal 1982: 39 and 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997,2: 93.

⁴⁴⁵ 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 93-94, sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 23-24, sKu rgyal 1982: 40, and Tshangs gsar 2005: 292.

⁴⁴⁶ Compare 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 1: 64, sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 24. The information on the year is taken from sGa Karma don grub, et al. (1999: 295).

The newly built monastery temple was constructed with great splendor and enshrined important relics.⁴⁴⁷ Some of the sacred supports that adorned the main temple (*gtsug lag khang*), were commissioned by the 'Jang sa tham ruler, who also provided sKyo brag with a ceremonial seal.⁴⁴⁸ Inside the magnificent statues, important relics of the bKa' brgyud pa root lineage were placed.⁴⁴⁹ Such grandeur attracted more splendor. For the inauguration (*rab gnas*) of the main temple Glang ras pa invited the 4th head of the Karma pa school, Rol pa'i rdo rje (1340–1383).⁴⁵⁰ Since that time, most of the hierarchs of the Karma bKa' brgyud school visited the monastery and indeed, the impact of this kindred, but more influential sect onto the structural and doctrinal development of the 'Ba' rom pa cannot be underestimated.

Already at the time of its foundation, sKyo brag focused the power of many Central Asian states and historical dynasties:

[The sKyo brag monastery] became the “crown ornament” (= *gtsug rgyan*) among sublime objects of veneration for the Hor, 'Jang, Tangut realms, and so on, as well as for China, Tibet and Mongolia.⁴⁵¹

The 'Ba' rom Mahāmudrā-continuity after Glang ras pa was further passed on to another sKyo brag master, whose fame would exceed his own.⁴⁵² The bequest of this doyen remains alive among both the revivalists in today's sKyo brag and the local people, as the legends of his Tantric prowess and miraculous feats are repeated continuously in the region today. bSod nams bzang po, at all times described with the honorific appellation of the “Dharma Lord of sKyo brag” (sKyo brag chos rje) (1372/3-1450/1), was from the 'Dan ma clan.⁴⁵³ It is said that in his former existences, he had been both Mi la ras pa as well as 'Ba'rom Dar ma dbang phyug.⁴⁵⁴ sKyo brag chos rje received ordination from sTong nag ras pa and was also a close student of the 5th Karma pa bDe bzhin gshegs pa (1384–1415).⁴⁵⁵ Apparently, Chos rje was a

⁴⁴⁷ 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 1: 65. Compare sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 24-5, also see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 303-4.

⁴⁴⁸ sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 28.

⁴⁴⁹ sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 25.

⁴⁵⁰ sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 26. Moreover, there are many indications that Rol pa'i rdo rje was the one who inspired the last Yuan emperor Toghun Temur (1320-1370) to sponsor the construction at sKyo brag.

⁴⁵¹ Hor 'jang me nyag sogs dang rgya bod sog gsum gyi dbu'i mchod gnas kyi gtsug rgyan du gyur/ (sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 28).

⁴⁵² The designation of sKyo brag chos rje as a specific Mahāmudrā heir: sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 28.

⁴⁵³ sKu rgyal 1982: 40-41. This was my only source for the birth and death dates. Since it only quotes the years in the Tibetan astrological terms, but not the months, the exact dates cannot be ascertained.

⁴⁵⁴ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 181.

⁴⁵⁵ According to Tshangs gsar 2005: 289-290. However, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. (1995-1997, 2: 94) claims his ordination master was Tshang gsar bsod nams.

sngags pa since there are many mentions of his consort, the *dākinī* A khro ma.⁴⁵⁶ He had ties to powerful people from China, Mongolia and Tibet, but his main patron was the monarch of 'Ga' in eastern Mi nyag.⁴⁵⁷

At sKyo brag, Chos rje is still remembered today mostly through legends about the flock of his thirteen disciples who mastered the art of flying. He chose his consort to be the lineage holder of the 'Ba' rom instructions.⁴⁵⁸ Some sources portray him as the last master indisputably linked to the specific 'Ba' rom transmission of the Six Yogas.

Between 15th/16th centuries, the monastery developed its three specific reincarnation lineages (*sKyo brag rnam sprul gsum*): gSal byed rin po che, bsTan snying phun thogs and Dung dkar rin po che; the latter a line initiated by a cotton-clad *gtum mo* master.⁴⁵⁹ bsTan snying incarnates additionally held the *be hu* post for the region.⁴⁶⁰ Most of the sKyo brag abbots were dedicated hermits and accomplishes of the Six Yogas.⁴⁶¹

gNam chos Mi 'gyur (1645-1667), the discoverer of the renowned *gNam chos* cycle, is said to have ritually opened the *gnas* in 1661 and revealed various types of gTer ma.⁴⁶² His successor, Yon dge Mi 'gyur 3rd (dates unknown), developed the local *gnas yig* tradition. His *sKyo brag gnas yig* became a well-known scripture, studied by Kong sprul, who also visited the *gnas* himself and expressed a wish to renew the 'Ba' rom teachings and practices.⁴⁶³

As described in the chapter devoted to the Ris med *gter stons*, the activity of Treasure revealers frequently united the new doctrines they revealed with local traditions of the *gter gnas*. This inclusivist strategy would equally benefit the reputation of the revealer. This was

⁴⁵⁶ Tshangs gsar 2005: 275, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 85 and sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 295-296.

⁴⁵⁷ The 'Ga' is not to be confused with sGa in upper Khams, which was under the jurisdiction of the Nang chen *rgyal po*. Compare sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 32-35 and Bardor Tulku 2010 b. See also Sperling 2003: 10.

⁴⁵⁸ Legends of their activity at the *gnas* of Chab sti brag dkar, where the hermitage of this case study is located, will be mentioned below.

⁴⁵⁹ The first incarnation of Dung dkar ba was renown for his mastery of the Inner Heat (hence the appellation Ras chen) as well as for his introduction of the uncle-nephew succession (*dbon brgyud*) into the abbot line. In fact, his particular family lineage was supposed to have been ennobled by the ancestry of Ti shri ras pa himself. Later in the sequence of abbots, the nephew line merged with the incarnates' line into the "unified lineage" (*zung 'jug brgyud*) (Tshangs gsar 2005: 299). Also see 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 97, sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 297-298, 302-303 and Tshangs gsar 2005: 298-299.

⁴⁶⁰ Pu Wencheng 1991: 67.

⁴⁶¹ For the abbots see sKu rgyal 1982: 43-49, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 94-97 and Tshangs gsar 2005: 291-299. These sources describe the abbot succession at sKyo brag until the time of the 9th Karma pa i.e. (1556-1603).

⁴⁶² Pu Wencheng 1991: 23-24, 91. See also Gardner 2007: 190. One may note the consecutive "openings" of the *gnas*, which present sKyo brag as "contested space." See Quintman 2008 and Chapter Three of the current dissertation.

⁴⁶³ Gardner 2007: 206.

the case of the 'Ba' rom revivalist active in sKyo brag, gTer chen 'Bar ba'i rdor je (1836-1920), whose role for survival of this hermitic center will be recounted for as below.⁴⁶⁴

VI.2.1.1. Ris med and the first 'Ba' rom revival at sKyo brag

In the 19th century, sKyo brag was a thriving monastic center, though it is sometimes said that the 'Ba' rom doctrines in their “secret” (*gsang ba*) aspect, i.e. the yogic practices applied in retreat, had been neglected.⁴⁶⁵ The influx of important Karma bKa' brgyud pa and Ris med lamas ensured its prominent position on the religious scene in both Nang chen and sDe dge.

It was at sKyo brag that Kong sprul met his main guru, the 9th Si tu Padma Nyin byed dbang po (1774-1853) for the first time.⁴⁶⁶ As a young Sanskrit tutor to Theg mchog rdo rje, the 14th Karma pa (1798–1868), Kong sprul also travelled to sKyo brag in 1837.⁴⁶⁷ Moreover, two of the three main reincarnates of sKyo brag, Dung dkar and gSal byed, were Kong sprul's associates, disciples and gurus at the same time.⁴⁶⁸ From the point of view of today's revival, and especially this case study, the most significant of Kong sprul's contributions to sKyo brag's religious scene was his introduction of a ritual, carried out in sKyo brag and in the hermitage of La phyi again today. It was the *Mi la ras pa guru-sāadhanā* (*Mi la bla sgrub*), which Kong sprul composed and enclosed into the *rGya chen bka' mdzod*. In 1893 at sKyo brag, he bestowed the empowerment and “authorization [by reading]” (*lung*) for this practice to the monastery's incarnates and other disciples.⁴⁶⁹

Later in his life, Kong sprul developed the ambition to restore the 'Ba' rom teachings of sKyo brag, in accordance with following the wish of Si tu. Especially the autobiography of gTer chen 'Bar ba'i rdor je (1836-1920) recounts Kong sprul's unfulfilled intention to collect the 'Ba' rom pa scriptures, which had become rare. He hoped to include them into the *gDams ngag mdzod*, in order to ensure the longevity of the transmission.⁴⁷⁰

The same *rnam thar* contains a detailed description of the activities of 'Bar ba'i rdor je and his success in renewing the 'Ba' rom practices not only on the scriptural, but also ritual plane.⁴⁷¹ 'Bar ba'i rdor je, who was a Karma bKa' brgyud pa reincarnate, displayed early

⁴⁶⁴ The above material on the 'Ba' rom school is an extract of a more extensive study that I have managed to carry out mostly with the help of reprints of rare literature obtained in the field. Since it exceeds the scope of this thesis, it will be published elsewhere.

⁴⁶⁵ See Bardor Tulku 2010 a.

⁴⁶⁶ Schuh 1976: xxxvii.

⁴⁶⁷ Schuh 1976: xlii and Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 33.

⁴⁶⁸ Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 217, 246.

⁴⁶⁹ Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 246, 363.

⁴⁷⁰ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 166.

⁴⁷¹ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 34-5.

intersectarian interests, and when his sister became the principal consort to mChog gyur gling pa, 'Bar ba'i rdo rje became his close disciple and assistant in the gTer excavations.⁴⁷² Through mChog gling he also became a disciple of the remaining Ris med masters, Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse, and the 14th Karma pa.

'Bar ba'i rdo rje became a zealous advocate of the newly discovered narrative map of twenty-five *gnas* of A mdo and Khams. He visited most of the sites himself and frequently used the newly established hermitages for meditation retreat and activity.⁴⁷³ In fact, it was at sKyo brag, Number One on mChog gling's narrative map, that 'Bar ba'i rdo rje unearthed his first Treasure. He established a guru-disciple connection with all sKyo brag reincarnates, and eventually most of the local monastic community turned into eager addressees of his Treasures.⁴⁷⁴ When 'Bar ba'i rdo rje went into retreat at the Nyi zla cave of sKyo brag, the area became the scene for his marvels: further gTer revelations and pacts with the White Upāsaka (*dGe bsnyen dkar po*), the local guardian sworn to protect the 'Ba' rom school.⁴⁷⁵

Around 1902,⁴⁷⁶ probably because of his ties with sKyo brag as *gter gnas*, 'Bar ba'i rdo rje was formally asked by his closest disciple and later abbot of sKyo brag, Karma bKa' brgyud bkra shis (?-1953?)⁴⁷⁷ to renew the almost forgotten hermitic practices of the 'Ba' rom school.⁴⁷⁸

Not only 'Bar ba'i rdo rje, but also other authors like sKu rgyal (b.1935), describe this restorative activity with great precision, for if the *gter ston*'s involvement was to be successful, he had to prove his direct connection with the transmission lineage. In his autobiography, in a manner typical for a Treasure revealer, 'Bar ba'i rdo rje employs the past in order to authorize his current endeavors. He claimed to be holder of the “long lineage” (*ring brgyud*), the “[short] lineage of pure vision” (*dag snang gi brgyud*) also known as “the

⁴⁷² Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 37-8.

⁴⁷³ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005 and Barway Dorje, et al. 2007.

⁴⁷⁴ Barway Dorje, et al. 2007: 126, 146, 154.

⁴⁷⁵ Barway Dorje, et al. 2007: 40, 102-104, 155.

⁴⁷⁶ Compare sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 102 and Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 165-6.

⁴⁷⁷ Karma bKa' brgyud bkra shis alias rGyal sras gZhan phan chos kyi grags pa (19th/20th centuries) was one of the hereditary abbots of sKyo brag in the uncle-nephew line. This lama would become an important master in the most recent local history. He was also editor for 'Bar ba'i rdo rje's autobiography and songs quoted in this thesis. Moreover, Karma bKa' brgyud bkra shis was a *ras pa*; he is traditionally depicted with a white robe and red meditation belt; elderly hermits at sKyo brag still remember his influence on the development of the area's retreat practices. See 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 2: 97; Tshangs gsar 2005: 299, and sKu rgyal 1982: 51. Also see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 102-103.

⁴⁷⁸ With the help of an incarnate from another 'Ba' rom monastery in Nang chen, bKa' brgyud bkra shis had already collected scriptures for this purpose; they were sKyo brag Chos rje's writings on both Thar lam and Thabs lam.

very close/short lineage” (*brgyud shin tu nye ba*), and the “lineage of recollection” (*rjes dran kyi brgyud*) of the ’Ba’ rom Golden Dharmas (*’ba’ rom gser chos*).⁴⁷⁹

’Bar ba’i rdo rje’s possession of the “long lineage” was what probably authorized him to act on behalf of the ’Ba’ rom pa in the first place. As a Zur mang reincarnate, he obtained the transmission of its founder, Matiratna (Blo gros rin chen, b.1386),⁴⁸⁰ which the latter master had received from the sKyo brag patriarch, Glang ras pa. Furthermore, while at Karma dgon, seat of the Karma pa hierarchs in Khams, in a dream-like state he received the “visionary lineage” from a female master referred to by the name of gNam mkha’i rnal ’byor ma. According to ’Bar ba’i rdo rje, she was an emanation of A khro ma, consort to the famous sKyo brag Chos rje and a ’Ba’ rom lineage holder in her own right.⁴⁸¹

The legitimization of the revival was completed with ’Bar ba’i rdo rje’s conviction of his previous existence as sKyo brag Chos rjes himself. In particular, he suddenly recalled the instructions on meditation and yogic exercises (*’phrul ’khor*) and his experiences in retreat. This awareness was something that allowed him to become the holder of the ’Ba’ rom pa “lineage of recollection.”⁴⁸²

Additionally urged by the Karma dgon abbot, Zla bzang rin po che (dates unknown), ’Bar ba’i rdo rje launched his mission by first putting the instructions and liturgies of the revived Golden Dharmas into writing. He chose an auspicious day and places, which were the different hermitages of sKyo brag, positioned on mChog gling’s narrative map.⁴⁸³ He based his composition work on the texts by early ’Ba’ rom masters – Ti shri ras pa, Lus med rdo rje and sKyo brag Chos rje. They were completed by visionary experiences; ’Bar ba’i rdo rje ensured their accuracy with the essential meditation instructions of the ’Ba’ rom patriarchs. bKa’ brgyud bKra shis acted as scribe; afterwards, ’Bar ba’i rdo rje set off to propagate the teachings.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁷⁹ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 169-170 and sKu rgyal 1982: 52.

⁴⁸⁰ Matiratna was sKyo brag Chos rje’s colleague. In most of the local literature, Matiratna is presented as a ’Ba’rom lineage holder, whereas in the Zur mang sources he is Drung pa 1st.

⁴⁸¹ The designation “visionary lineage” (*dag snang gi brgyud*) would suggest that the *ḍākinī* existed only as an apparition. However, it is highly ambiguous both in the autobiography of ’Bar ba’i rdo rje (Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 169-170) and in sKu rgyal 1982: 50-54. For instance, both of these sources emphasize her “woman’s form” (*mi mo’i tshul*), etc. See sKu rgyal 1982: 51-52; compare Barway Dorje, et al. 2007: 68-69 and Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 174-175. The identity of gNam mkha’i rnal ’byor ma remains all the more allusive, as ’Bar ba’i rdo rje’s lineage tree depicts no such female figure.

⁴⁸² Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 25, 170. However, he also writes in his autobiography that he believes himself to have been an incarnation of Mi la ras pa (Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 24-25). This will become important for the naming of the meditation school of La phyi, described in the case study chapters. See Chapter VIII.2.

⁴⁸³ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 170.

⁴⁸⁴ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 171.

Slightly later that same year, 'Bar ba'i rdo rje returned to sKyo brag and again went into retreat. During this time, between the meditation sessions (*methun*) he called in a small group of disciples and transmitted the empowerments (*dbang*) as well as oral instructions (*khrid*) necessary to practice meditation according to his writings. He demonstrated the yogic exercises (*'phrul 'khor*) to bKa' brgyud bKra shis and expressed a wish that the latter would pass them on to others. After that, he also offered the transmissions of the renewed Golden Dharmas to the three sKyo brag reincarnates and other local masters.⁴⁸⁵

'Bar ba'i rdo rje instructed his disciples to build new retreat facilities, and his later incarnations continued the restorative activity with respect to meditation practice.⁴⁸⁶ He became associated specifically with the secret aspect of the 'Ba' rom teachings performed in ritual seclusion. In fact, it is only in the context of the hermitic revival that he is mentioned in the sKyo brag chronicles.⁴⁸⁷

With the advent of 'Bar ba'i rdo rje at sKyo brag, the *shamanic* element regained importance and redefined the ritual context of the area. This pattern is repeated by contemporary revivalists, which will be mentioned in the sections below.

VI.2.1.2. sKyo brag before and during the “peaceful liberation”

Since the time of gTer chen 'Bar ba'i rdo rje, the secret teachings of the Six Yogas are said to have been practiced by many meditators in the sKyo brag retreat facilities and also by those who followed the lifestyle of Mi la ras pa and lived in the mountains.⁴⁸⁸ The hermitic practices flourished and new training sites were being established. In 1911, in accordance with the wishes of the 15th Karma pa, the *ras pa* bKa' brgyud bKra shis founded a nunnery along with its retreat complex.⁴⁸⁹ When he died, his remains were placed in a gold and silver-plated *stūpa*.⁴⁹⁰

One of the disciples of bKa' brgyud bKra shis was the great meditator dGe 'dun rin po che (1918-1997). Starting from the mid 1970s, he became widely known in the West, when he founded three-year retreat enclosures in France at the request of the 16th Karma pa Rang

⁴⁸⁵ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 172-173, 178. Also see “Biography of the 4th Venerable Sonam Tenzin Rinpoche and Chodrak Dechen Choling,” internet PDF-resource, p.5 (accessed 24.10.2010).

⁴⁸⁶ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 179 and sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 104-105.

⁴⁸⁷ Also compare Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 247-8, 389 n.196.

⁴⁸⁸ Bardor Tulku 2010 a.

⁴⁸⁹ “Chodrak Methu Geygun Kacho Dechen Choling: A description and short history of the Nunnery.” <http://www.chodraknunnery.org/> (accessed 17.12.2010).

⁴⁹⁰ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 304.

byung rig pa'i rdo rje (1924–1981).⁴⁹¹ dGe 'dun rin po che was educated in the Pad sdong *sgrub khang* and after completing his education, in its *mgon khang*, belonging to the sKyo brag complex.⁴⁹² Already during his first three-year retreat period he became known for his achievement in *gtum mo*; he began wearing a single cotton cloth and was reported to have melted snow and ice.⁴⁹³ As a graduate of the sKyo brag *sgrub khang*, he was entitled to wearing the five-peaked hat, much like the protagonists of the current revival.⁴⁹⁴ Lama dGe 'dun's oral accounts as well as his photographs from this period show a blossoming retreat activity in sKyo brag.⁴⁹⁵ He reports that the area was famous for many *gtum mo* accomplishers, who inhabited the caves and cabins in the mountains, characteristic for their single white cotton robes.⁴⁹⁶

According to Gruschke, before the People's Liberation Army arrived at Nang chen, the monastic-hermitic center of sKyo brag included four reincarnates and over 500 monks, who occupied extensive dwellings and congregated at a sixty-seven-pillar 'du khang. There were also three other temples, nine *sgrub khangs* as well as more individual retreat sites. sKyo brag was in possession of many precious relics and practice supports.⁴⁹⁷

With the arrival of the PLA, dramatic changes occurred at sKyo brag. During the 1950 Chab mdo campaign, the troops passed through Nang chen and most probably through sKyo brag, which is implied by independent sources. The invasion was marked by violence, and fighting is reported to have broken out in all parts of Nang chen after the capture of sKye dgu mdo.⁴⁹⁸ It appears that several sKyo brag reincarnates were killed in the fighting:

[...] After that, the reincarnates successively died. When the Kuomintang rule lost power, the new People's Republic of China was established. At that time, in spite

⁴⁹¹ Interestingly enough, he had been sent to the West specifically as a Karma bKa' brgyud representative and lineage-holder (*brgyud 'dzin*).

⁴⁹² The classical bKa' brgyud three-year retreat, also in the 'Ba' rom school, can be enhanced with protector practice of three years at a *mgon khang* (protector temple).

⁴⁹³ Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 26-7.

⁴⁹⁴ Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 24.

⁴⁹⁵ *Gendun Rinpoche von Tschodrak*, unpublished manuscript obtained at the courtesy of Lama Lhundrup.

⁴⁹⁶ Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 23.

⁴⁹⁷ Gruschke 2004: 134; Pu Wencheng 1991: 67, also see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 303-304.

⁴⁹⁸ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 303. As for the Chab mdo campaign (October 5th- 19th 1950): both Gruschke (2004: 21, fig. 12) and Goldstein (2007: 690) report that the PLA came from the north via sKye dgu mdo and through other areas in Nang chen. It is likely that they marched through sKyo brag, even though it lies off the sKye dgu mdo-Ri bo che tract where the army was heading; still, the monastic center of sKyo brag is located in the north and at that time was an important power hub. When the 154th Regiment of the PLA "went through Nangchen" Goldstein (2007: 690), the region had been under Chinese control already. Therefore, one can speculate if there was fighting at sKyo brag before the capture of sKye dgu mdo in July that year or thereafter, during the Chab mdo campaign in October, when the PLA soldiers were marching onto Ri bo che. See Karma phrin las 1965: 49-50, Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2375, and Gruschke 2004: 33.

of the great turmoil of the transformation, regardless of the various outer and inner adverse conditions, memorial service for the [dead] reincarnates [was performed], offerings [were made] in their name and funeral *stūpas* (*gdung rten*) erected.⁴⁹⁹

Subsequently, a search for new incarnations was conducted; they were enthroned and assumed their responsibilities. In the rapidly changing reality of Kham, these responsibilities included attending political campaigns orchestrated by the Chinese communist authorities, who installed the three chief sKyo brag lamas as government cadres.⁵⁰⁰

This state of affairs was continued until 1958, the turning point for most of Nang chen's monasteries. As a result of the abolishment of the *be hu* position and the collectivization of the area, a violent revolt broke out and in consequence, the monastic center became subject to the "democratic reform of monasteries."⁵⁰¹ In practice, this meant a brutal crackdown that resulted in the killing of the 8th bsTan snying and the flight of the 6th Dung dkar *sprul sku*.⁵⁰² The oldest of the three main lamas, who traditionally ruled over sKyo brag estate as *be hu*, was arrested and imprisoned together with his father. One of his brothers took over the responsibility for the monastery for the short time it still remained open.⁵⁰³

It was only a few months after these events that the monastery was destroyed. Finally, for over two decades to come, the monastery was closed along with other religious institutions in Yu shu TAP.

In 1959 the turbulences continued, as the sKyo brag nunnery was destroyed; the PLA troops even concentrated in the area in order to repress the Khams pa insurgency.⁵⁰⁴ Now that monasticism was illegal, hermitism, even if less communal, was also being targeted. The aforementioned sKyo brag meditator, dGe 'dun rin po che declares that he himself, as well as

⁴⁹⁹ *de nas bla sprul rnams rim bzhin gshegs/krung hwa min go'i srid dbang shor nas krung hwa mi mangs spyi mthun rgyal khab gsar du btsugs pa'i dus 'gyur gyi zing cha che ba'i skabs kyang phyi nang gi 'gal rkyen sna tshogs la ma ltos par bla sprul rnams kyi dgongs rdzogs dang mchod 'bul gdung rten bzhengs pa/* (sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 303). Judging from the fragmentary data given in this source, I suppose that one of the victims was the 8th gSal byed, who is reported to have died at the age of twenty-five.

⁵⁰⁰ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 303. Compare Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2404.

⁵⁰¹ W. W. Smith 1994: 67, Yan Chia-Ming 2006: 9-12.

⁵⁰² According to sGa Karma don grub, et al. (1999:303), the 6th Dung dkar escaped into the mountains as a nine-year old. He came back when he was in his late twenties, but his family, relatives and possessions had disappeared and no one knew where. As for gSal byed, sGa Karma don grub, et al. (1999: 301) reports that the young reincarnate remained utterly unaffected by both the turmoil of 1958 and the famine of 1960. Also see Yan Chia-Ming 2006: 9. Compare also Gruschke 2004: 33-4, Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2400, 2404 and 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997: 213.

⁵⁰³ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 303.

⁵⁰⁴ See Tsonyi & Draszczyk (n.d.) and Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 31-36. Compare sGa Karma don grub, et al. (1999: 299) who gives an even earlier date of 1958 when local yogins were forced to flee.

other hermits from the area were forced to flee the approaching Chinese army and were forced to avoid local rebels who were acutely aware of communist spies.⁵⁰⁵

1960 brought a great famine that followed the collectivization, the constant unrest as well as Mao's Great Leap.⁵⁰⁶ In 1962, a special local commission of Party delegates was called into being. They attempted to restore some of the monastery buildings, but did not succeed, since the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that began four years later, utterly and finally completed the devastation.⁵⁰⁷

bsTan snying 9th (b.1979) became the only reincarnate of the sKyo brag trinity to have fled his country into exile. He established a monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal.⁵⁰⁸

VI.2.1.2.1. Chab sti – the local hub of meditation and miracles

In a mountain range towering above sKyo brag, around two hours on foot up the hills surrounding the monastery grounds or forty-five minutes with a jeep up a rocky road, lies Chab sti brag dkar (abbreviated as Chab sti or Chab brag),⁵⁰⁹ a sacred area said to be an extension or branch (*yan lag*) of the sPyi byams *gnas*, subordinated to the main power place of Seng ge rdzong.⁵¹⁰ The inclusivist logic of *gnas*-networking I described in the chapter on the Ris med movement is therefore also used in this area.

The Chab sti *gnas* itself is a vast area of hills covered with short highland grass and crowned by the characteristic white, rocky mountain chain. There are many natural caves in the rock wall, some of them opening many meters above the ground. The heart of the *gnas* is one of such caverns named the Golden Cave (*gser phug*) and the source of many legends. It is precisely here that the meditation school of La phyi was established in 2005, which is why I shall now briefly analyze the modest amount of historical information available on this venue.

It seems that in the vicinity of this holy site existed a village and clan by that same name.⁵¹¹ Gendun Rinpoche describes The Golden Cave area as the site of the miraculous birth of Sangs

⁵⁰⁵ Lama Gendun along with two colleagues reached safety in exile. One of them was Lama Gawang (=dGa' dbang) based in the Netherlands today. For his activity in the West today see "About our Rinpoche: Chödje Lama Gawang Rinpoche," <http://englishversion.karmakagyu.nl/gawang.html>, accessed 12.12.2010.

⁵⁰⁶ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 301, W.W. Smith 1994: 68.

⁵⁰⁷ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 304, Gruschke 2004: 134.

⁵⁰⁸ "Biography of the 4th Venerable Sonam Tenzin Rinpoche and Chodrak Dechen Choling," internet PDF-resource, p.8 (accessed 24.10.2010); oral interview with Lama Lhundrup of France, 19.01.2010 and sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 299-300. Compare Gendun Rinpoche 2011: 64-65 and sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 299-300.

⁵⁰⁹ Alternative orthography: "Chab ti," see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999.

⁵¹⁰ dPa' brtan mkhan po 2003: 111, sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 6.

⁵¹¹ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 315. *Gendun Rinpoche von Tschodrak* reveals that Gendun Rinpoche's mother's clan name was Chab sti.

rgyas yel pa ye shes brtsegs pa (1134-1194), founder of the Yel pa bKa' brgyud school and of the important rTa rna *dgon* in lower Nang chen.⁵¹² Local tradition claims that in the 14th/15th centuries, sKyo brag chos rje along with his consort, the *dākinī* A khro ma, were seen flying up to meditate at this power place dedicated to the semi-wrathful deity Seng gdong ma (Skt. Simhamukha). The boulders are inscribed with mantric script written by A khro ma, as well as her and Chos rje's foot prints and body prints.⁵¹³ Local legends emphasize that it was at Chab sti that they performed a seven-year retreat on Hevajra, and their thirteen disciples took to the air to practice with them.⁵¹⁴ Until today, the number thirteen is applied by the lamas of sKyo brag in the context of local tradition of yogic training to commemorate the "the thirteen 'Ba' rom [master-disciples] who could fly" ('Ba' rom 'phur shes bcu gsum)."⁵¹⁵

Merely two *gnas yig* scriptures for Chab sti have survived until today, both of them exceptionally brief. One of these texts, entitled *Chab sti brag dkar gyi gnas yig*, stems from the pre-Ris med time and was composed by the guru of mChog gling, Kong sprul and 'Bar ba'i rdo rje, namely the 8th dPa' bo gTsug lag chos kyi rgyal po (19th century).⁵¹⁶ Since there are many indications that this Karma bKa' brgyud pa lama was also unquestionably linked to the rNying ma pa school, it is only logical that he viewed Chab sti as a power place dedicated to Padmasambhava. He also mentions the number thirteen, symbolic for this site:

Especially at this place, naturally arisen images of Padmasambhava and others, of *buddhas*, *bodhisattvas* and so on, as well as footprints of O rgyan and the like - a number of pure appearances became visible. It is said about these appearances that in the expanse of devoted minds of individuals with pure *karma*, magical display of the compassion of *buddhas* [can] manifest in any form. Therefore, if faithful ones perform **thirteen** prostrations and circumambulations, wishing prayers and consecration rituals for the manifestations as inseparable from the Lotus Light [palace] of Great Bliss (=Padma 'od), their current hindrances will be pacified, whatever wishes [they might have] will be fulfilled; later rebirth in a happy place, etc. and countless benefits will be attained – that is certain.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹² Tsonyi & Draszczyk (n.d.), *Gendun Rinpoche von Tschodrak*. The miraculous circumstances are described in detail in sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 520.

⁵¹³ Bardor Tulku 2010 a and 2010 b; *Gendun Rinpoche von Tschodrak*.

⁵¹⁴ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 295, sKyo brag bshad grwa (n.d.): 35-40, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 1: 94; Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 22-3.

⁵¹⁵ See below for the 'Ba' rom revival at sKyo brag. Also see *Gendun Rinpoche von Tschodrak* and Bardor Tulku 2010 a and 2010 b.

⁵¹⁶ dPa' bo gTsug lag chos rgyal 2003. This author was also the younger brother of the 9th Si tu pa.

⁵¹⁷ *khyad par gnas der padma sambha wa la sogs pa sangs rgyas byang sems sogs kyi sku rang byon dang/o rgyan gyi zhabs rjes la sogs pa dag pa'i snang ba 'ga' zhig gsal 'dug pa'i de dag ni so so las dag pa rnams kyi mos pa'i yid mkhar sangs rgyas rnams kyi thugs rje'i sgyu 'phrul cir yang 'char bar gsungs pas/ des na dad ldan rnams nas bde chen padma 'od dang dbyer med du gsal ba'i phyag bskor ba bcu gsum smon lam rabs gnas sogs bgyis na/ gnas skabs tshe yi bar chad zhi zhing/ ci bsam 'grub pa dang/ phyi ma bde ldan zhing du skye ba sogs*

The other *gnas yig* most probably predates the one quote above. It was written by the sKyo brag reincarnate Dung dkar, who especially recounts the miraculous events surrounding its opening by himself or his earlier incarnation.⁵¹⁸ In accordance with the genre, auspicious signs are described, as the reader is informed about rainbows, a downpour of flowers, etc. Dung dkar also emphasizes the benefit of thirteen circumambulations and compares the benefit of pilgrimage here to travelling to Gangs Ti se (Kailāśā).

Since there is so little textual data on the area of Chab sti, and even less on human activity in this area, one can only suppose that its surroundings were still used as pilgrimage destinations after the 15th century and that its caves served the local yogins as places of retreat, in keeping with the local tradition of Chos rje and his disciples.

'Bar ba'i rdo rje revived the hermitic practices of sKyo brag at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. He appreciated the area of Chab sti brag dkar greatly and popularized the mythos of the great hermit Chos rje, which had waned in the meantime. In his autobiography, 'Bar ba'i rdo rje emphasized that it was at gSer phug where the sKyo brag patriarch attained the various *siddhi*. He also envisioned Chab sti as a crystal *stūpa* containing the pure realm (*zhing kham*s) of Vajrasattva, which may have contributed to the fact that the site is primarily known in this way also today.⁵¹⁹

When discussing the naming of the case study hermitage, I shall additionally devote more attention to 'Bar ba'i rdo rje's comparison of Chab sti with the legendary site of La phyi, which he explained by the interdependence of Chos rje having been Mi la ras pa in a previous lifetime.⁵²⁰

It seems like 'Bar ba'i rdo rje revived Chab sti to the position of an active meditation venue, since his main sKyo brag disciple, Karma bKa' brgyud bkra shis, used the Golden Cave for personal retreats and for completing the *rnam thar* composition of his master.⁵²¹

Neither in 1958 nor during the Cultural Revolution did the site undergo devastation, because no infrastructure existed that could have been destroyed. Local tradition has it however, that when religious persecution reached its peak, the yogins who had been practicing in the Chab sti caves ran away into the more remote mountain areas, where they could not be seen. After 1980, the venue could again be opened for religious purposes. Ever

phan yon dpag med thob pa yin pas de ltar nges 'tshal/ (dPa' bo gTsug lag chos rgyal 2003: 112-113, emphasis mine).

⁵¹⁸ sKyo brag Dung dkar 2003:114-116. The opening of Chab brag by Dung dkar is cited by gTsug lag chos rgyal (2003), however, the text gives no indication as to the time of its composition.

⁵¹⁹ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 25, 180-181.

⁵²⁰ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 180-181.

⁵²¹ Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 237-238.

since, it has been used again by meditators of the 'Ba' rom pa school and as Vajrasattva and Padmasambhava *gnas*. It is visited for *skor ba* rounds by local people; some major lamas from beyond the locality perform pilgrimage here as well. However, it is mostly famous through the actions of Tshul khrims mthar phyin.

VI.3. The 'Ba' rom pa teachings and practices

Much of this thesis has been devoted to the uniqueness of the 'Ba' rom transmission. However, it must also be emphasized that all bKa' brgyud schools share the same philosophical and ritual basis created by sGam po pa bSod nams rin chen between the 11th and 12th century. This common ground is emphasized by many 'Ba' rom pa lineage holders; the five-peaked hat (*dbu zhwa rtse lnga*), crafted by Ti shri ras pa and used ever since by 'Ba' rom pa lamas as an emblem of their unique tradition, is the best example for this common ground. The peaks commemorate Ti shri ras pa's gurus, founders of the different bKa' brgyud schools of 'Ba' rom, Tshal pa, 'Bri gung and sTag lung.^{522 523} The emergence of this ceremonial icon shows that in the early 12th century, the 'Ba' rom pa was still on its way to fully assume its autonomous identity.

The basic component of the broader bKa' brgyud pa blend are the Mahāyāna-related vows of conduct and of *bodhicitta* that sGam po pa had inherited from his bKa' gdams pa preceptors. The second are the Tantric instructions, which sGam po pa received from Mi la ras pa, and which are further broken down onto the Thabs lam tradition, comprising the different *devattayoga- sādhanās* (*yi dam*) as well as the Six Yogas of Nāropa (*Nā ro chos drug*). Finally, the 'Ba' rom has also perpetrated the Mahāmudrā lore (*phyag rgya chen po*), which was a specialty of sGam po pa's, and which his gurus inherited from the Indian siddhas Saraha and Maitri pa.

All these precepts and ritual techniques were integrated into a "gradual path" (*lam rim*), which aimed at preparing the practitioner for enlightenment.⁵²⁴ Some practical aspects of this synthetic approach were introduced in Chapter Two, so I will only add that the paradoxical coexistence of religious training and preparation simultaneously with the spontaneous access to enlightened reality constitutes an emblematic feature of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

⁵²² See above in Chapter One; see also Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 23-24.

⁵²³ Puchung even goes as far to assert that the early 'Ba' rom pa doctrines were influenced by 'Bri gung and sTag lungs, but does not present evidence to support this argument. Puchung Tsering 2001: 9.

⁵²⁴ For sGam po pa's integration of the different transmissions and trends see the Trungram Gyaltrul Sherpa 2005.

sGam po pa's four main disciples established their distinctive sub-schools of Karma pa, 'Ba' rom pa, Tshal pa and Phag mo gru pa. The latter's disciples founded their monasteries and as all these developed in their local, often isolated environments, minor differences in emphasis and style began to appear.⁵²⁵ Combining the individual influences from other schools or lineages, these institutional, philosophical and ritual compounds would come to be regarded as distinct sub-schools, complete with the register of patriarchs and lineages of reincarnates, unique sets of doctrines, oral instructions and ritual styles.⁵²⁶

Accordingly, although Dar ma dbang phyug is seen as the 'Ba' rom founding father, with a certain degree of probability, one could claim that neither the content nor the form of his teaching were very different from that of other disciples of sGam po pa. With time, however, the 'Ba' rom school gained sufficient independence to maintain its own distinct lineage of Mahāmudrā as well as of The Six Yogas. These essential precepts have been collected into what is named The Hearing Lineage [of] Golden Dharmas (*snyan brgyud gser chos*).⁵²⁷ According to Lama Gendun, the chief characteristics of the 'Ba' rom Mahāmudrā rely on 'Bar ba'i rdo rje's "visionary lineage"; they are precepts that assist in recognizing discursive thoughts (*rnam rtog*) as the nature of phenomena (Skt. *dharmatā*, Tib. *chos nyid*). As for the 'Ba' rom Six Yogas, the Illusory Body (*sgyu lus*) is frequently combined with *yi dam* practice; there is the specific Transference of Consciousness (*'pho ba*) transmission, and the accompanying physical exercises (*'phrul 'khor/'khrul 'khor*) are slightly different from the ones used in the fellow Karma bKa' brgyud school.⁵²⁸

The chief 'Ba' rom deity is Cakrasaṃvara, and as for the major guru- *sādhana*, it focuses on the *nirṇāṇakāya* form of Dar ma dbang phyug.⁵²⁹ The principal protective practices are said to have been introduced into the 'Ba' rom school in the 13th century by Lus med rdo rje. They are centered around Four-Armed Mahākāla (mGon po phyag bzhi pa), Śrīdevī Dhūmāvatī (Dud sol ma) as well as Gaṇapati (Tshog kyi bdag po). The specific Mahākāla-transmission goes back to the gTer ma of gNam chos Mi 'gyur rdo rje. As for Dud sol ma, this deity had already been associated with the bKa' brgyud root transmission through Mar pa and

⁵²⁵ At times also originated by way of visionary experiences like in the later example of 'Bar ba'i rdo rje. Also see Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 23.

⁵²⁶ For an analysis of some of those developments, see Chapter One.

⁵²⁷ Yeshe Gyangtso 2005: vii, Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 169-172, sKu rgyal 1982: 23.

⁵²⁸ Bardor Tulku, written communication 17.01.2010; Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 23-24. According to Lama Lhundrup, the meditation teacher at the French Karma bKa' brgyud pa retreat enclosure in Le Bost, whose guru Gendun Rinpoche was educated in the 'Ba' rom pa hermitages of sKyo brag, the 'Ba' rom Six Yogas differ from the bKa' brgyud pa only slightly, and the differences concern minor details in the visualization (Lama Lhundrup, oral interview from 15.01.2010). Also see Gendün Rinpoche 2011: 23-24.

⁵²⁹ For text of this *sādhana*, see gSal byed & dPa' brtan 2009: 111-130.

Mi la ras pa; the unique 'Ba' rom transmission originated with Lus med rdo rje's vision of that deity.⁵³⁰

The 'Ba' rom school came to specialize in the hermitic application of teachings. This style was perpetrated in keeping with the *shamanic* style preferred in the pastoral kingdom of Nang chen. Thus, many 'Ba' rom pa masters were cotton-clad ascetics (*ras pa*), and wore a single, white cotton robe as a sign for the accomplishment of *gtum mo*, one of The Six Yogas, achieved in the course of training under extreme conditions as Mi la ras pa did.⁵³¹

It should also be noted that the restoration of 'Ba' rom pa doctrines occurred in sKyo brag in the 19th century through the revival of meditation training in retreat, including the collection of scriptures for the ritual techniques used, passing down the necessary oral instructions, as well as building new facilities for solitary practice. This again points to a firm yogic and ascetic orientation that this particular bKa' brgyud pa sub-school maintained in spite of the worldly and political triumphs of its early masters.

VI.3.1. The kindred schools of 'Ba' rom and Karma bKa' brgyud

Some scholars, like the Tibetologist and a high lama in the Karma bKa' brgyud pa hierarchy, Trungram Gyaltrul, go as far as claiming that the 'Ba' rom pa sect was merged with the Karma pa until its individuality disappeared completely.⁵³² However, both the investigation into the religious history of Nang chen as well as my field observations prove this view to be a simplification, which shall be elucidated in the following sections of this thesis. However, the prevalence of this view indicates the close connection that these two schools have maintained over the centuries. Although to clarify the exact nature of their relationship, a thorough analysis would be necessary, herein I will argue for what resembles the relationship of two siblings, in which the older one (in this case the more prevalent school of the Karma pa) will at times overpower and at other times support the younger one. In their correlation at sKyo brag, the two components intertwined and mutually determined one another, so that it is not always possible to resolve which of them is the prevailing force at a given moment.

As I have explained, the 'Ba' rom school was weakened through fragmentation and succession feuds as early as in the 14th century. It has failed to consolidate their transmission through a central institution of the main/grand lineage holder (*khri 'dzin/khri chen*), as in the

⁵³⁰ See Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 18-19, sKu rgyal 1982: 37.

⁵³¹ See: a separate section of the *gtum mo* yoga and *ras pas* as follows.

⁵³² <http://www.utbf.org/en/tradition/kagyud.ph> (accessed 24.10.2010). Also see Puchung Tsering 2001: 6.

case of the Karma pa or Sa skya pa schools. Neither did the 'Ba' rom pa succeed in focusing their power at one venue (*gdan sa*), whose abbots would serve as stream for upholding transmission, as in the case of the later dGe lugs pa sect.

Thus, the 'Ba' rom pa teachings were passed on within a multitude of lineages, hermitages and monasteries (out of which sKyo brag has come to play the greatest role); the influence of these venues was restricted to their nearest locality. In numerous cases, the historical narratives of those regional developments recount that a *sprul sku* line, hermitage or monastery maintained close contact with the Karma pa school and in time, many of the reincarnates developed into holders of both 'Ba' rom pa as well as Karma pa transmission.⁵³³

Sources describing the early development of both schools at Nang chen contain indications that their prevalence in this region of Khams could have been comparable at least until the second half of the 15th century. In the 13th century the 'Ba' rom "root monastery" of sKu 'bum became the first Tibetan religious institution supported by Mongols. In later chronicles, the figures of Drung rMa se (mainly Karma pa) and sKyo brag Chos rje (mainly 'Ba' rom pa) are presented as equally influential activists. Subsequently, both Zur mang and sKyo brag were established as large, powerful institutions that each prized their unique tradition of respectively, Karma pa and 'Ba' rom pa. Interestingly enough, there are records that prove that sKyo brag owed its very founding to Karma pa, as its 4th hierarch Rol pa'i rdo rje most probably inspired the last Mongol emperor of China to subsidize a project in the Nang chen region, located far from the Yuan capital.

The Karma bKa' brgyud pa influence on sKyo brag has been significant ever since, including the doctrinal level; therefore, Gruschke's claim about "the Karma-Kagyupa's minor role in Nangchen" cannot be substantiated.⁵³⁴ Firstly, the doctrinal and political influence of Zur mang and gNas mdo monasteries in the region cannot be underestimated; secondly, there are eleven active Karma pa convents in Nang chen today alone, and they maintain many old incarnate lineages.⁵³⁵ Moreover, the Karma bKa' brgyud was active through the 'Ba' rom pa network in Nang chen, spreading its influence in various ways. To begin with, the first incarnates of sKyo brag were pupils of the 9th Karma pa. It also appears that most of the following *sprul sku* at this monastery were recognized and enthroned by the consecutive Karma pas or other prominent Karma bKa' brgyud pa lamas.⁵³⁶ There is sufficient historical

⁵³³ Including the sKyo brag monastery itself, but also monasteries like Tshangs gsar or rDza ripa; nevertheless, local historians list these *dgong pa* as either 'Ba' rom pa or Karma pa.

⁵³⁴ Gruschke 2004: 126.

⁵³⁵ Compare sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 211-289.

⁵³⁶ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 297, 223, 298-301, 'Jam dbyangs 1997: 209.

data to determine without hesitation that all Karma pa lamas from the fifth, De bzhin gshegs pa (1384–1415) until the sixteenth, Rang byung rig pa'i rdo rje (1924–1981) were invited to sKyo brag in order to give teachings and hold ceremonies like *dbang* for the monastic community.⁵³⁷ sKyo brag was focused on Karma pas' support of their more *clerical* activity to such an extent, that by the 19th century, the 'Ba' rom school and its more *shamanic* practices applied in retreat had almost disappeared. These practices are being revived today, once again with the traditional Karma pa cooperation.

⁵³⁷ These influences were continued in exile as the 16th Karma pa educated and employed several sKyo brag 'Ba' rom pa lamas like Bardor Tulku or Gendun Rinpoche.

VII. The sKyo brag 'Ba' rom revival

Puchung and several other authors claim that the 'Ba' rom was first close to extinction as an independent school and that the Cultural Revolution was the final blow to its existence.⁵³⁸

However, the current situation at sKyo brag proves otherwise. Even if its revival is largely a local phenomenon, it simultaneously employs global Tibetan Buddhist networks. In fact, the local range of this revival fits the pattern that had driven the 'Ba' rom school since the early 14th century, when the sect began to develop through a number of regional power centers. Within this configuration, the monastic-hermitic complex of sKyo brag functioned as a venue that upheld the doctrinal and ritual identity of the 'Ba' rom pa for the longest time. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the modern revival of the school centers around this very location.

The first wave of 'Ba' rom restoration took place in the late 19th century and largely concerned the hermitic aspect of the 'Ba' rom legacy. Moreover, since it was carried out by a Ris med advocate and a close disciple to mChog gling, it is only logical that the second wave of revival employed the Ris med historical authority and rhetoric.

Apart from the “traditional” sKyo brag hermitism and non-sectarianism, also other strategies such as local difference and global influence are employed for the modern revival. These strategies are aimed at negotiating particular versions of the past to articulate a position, which, even if not explicitly political, opposes official state discourse.

The main agents in this local revival, similarly to the Ris med triad of the gTer chen gsum are “the sKyo brag Trinity of Reincarnates” (*sKyo brag rnam sprul gsum*) gSal byed rin po che, A bstan Phun tshogs and Dung dkar rin po che.⁵³⁹ Their activity is supported by “local saints”: the founder of La phyi *sgom grwa*, Tshul khriims mthar phyin and another local yogin, Ye shes rab rgyas (? - 1999). These five lamas are the main agents of the scriptural, ritual, and institutional renewal, which promotes the 'Ba' rom pa as an independent school with strong roots at sKyo brag, emphasizes the local history of ascetic and political power and includes affiliations with a number of influential Ris med and Karma bKa' brgyud pa masters.

The five main agents of the revival are assisted by the local community and authorities. Together they attempt to re-create sKyo brag as a scene for important ritual events and a blossoming center for religious enterprises and worldly power.

⁵³⁸ Puchung Tsering 2001: 6.

⁵³⁹ As a young teenager, Dung dkar rin po che is still being educated, but his high position is visible on posters which extol the 'Ba' rom school today.

The leadership in the revival should be divided into two different groups. Firstly, there are the three sKyo brag reincarnates, who embody tradition and continuity in the most direct, as well as uniquely Tibetan way;⁵⁴⁰ secondly, there are the independent yogins and scholars, who have ascended the ladder of religious hierarchy through their own capacity and dedication, such as Tshul khrims mthar phyin. I do not propose this distinction on grounds of the different positions that each of these groups occupies in the social or religious hierarchies, rather because the nature of their agencies has been significantly dissimilar. It seems that with most of the school heads and lineage holders gone into exile, Tibetan clergy was reduced both in number and in quality, so that the urgency to promote new talents and to reaffirm the validity of the Tibetan Tantric tradition has been increasing since the 1980s. This promotion is articulated through the production of new elites: both the *sprul sku* and the “self-made” authorities have taken an important leading position in the revival. In subsequent chapters, I will compare the agencies of the sKyo brag reincarnate gSal byed rin po che and the *shamanic* master-hermit Tshul khrims mthar phyin and demonstrate their mutual relations.

The revival began in 1980 when the first congress of the Qinghai Buddhist Association met at Xining and resolved to restore religious activity in the province. At sKyo brag, the monastic community re-emerged under the direction of gSal byed and Dung dkar, who had returned from hiding.⁵⁴¹ In fact, first ordinations were carried out already in 1979.⁵⁴² The monastery complex was rebuilt, along with its *'du khang*, relic *stūpas*, clinic and retreat facilities, etc. The restoration was carried out by local lay people and lamas, and financed by their private means. At one occasion, two tradesmen donated over 30,000 RMB.⁵⁴³

In 1983, the 9th bsTan snying came to visit his home-monastery from Kathmandu for the first time. A year later, the monastery was already fully functioning as it launched festive *lo gsar* celebrations complete with *'cham* (ritual dance).⁵⁴⁴

That same year, the sKyo brag nunnery was re-opened and sixty new nuns were ordained by gSal byed.⁵⁴⁵ In 1985, the 12th Si tu pa, who is based in India, visited sKyo brag, performed the *rab gnas* for the re-opened monastery and the many relics and sacred

⁵⁴⁰ For reincarnates as embodiments of tradition, see King 1996: 403, 413. Also compare A. W. Wallace 1956: 274.

⁵⁴¹ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 304-305.

⁵⁴² Although it seems they might have only been newly identified reincarnates. See "Biography of the 4th Venerable Sonam Tenzin Rinpoche."

⁵⁴³ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 306-307 mentions the names of the most significant benefactors, who were mostly wealthy local nomads or tradesmen. See also Gruschke 2004: 134, Puchung Tsering 2001: 4.

⁵⁴⁴ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 305.

⁵⁴⁵ <http://www.chodraknunnery.org/> (accessed 15.12.2010).

representations that had been re-assembled, including the ancient ones that had been concealed during the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁴⁶ On this occasion, gSal dga' renewed his own Vinaya vows and Si tu encouraged him to spread the path of monastic discipline.

In 1986, the monastery was enlarged with a special temple erected to host the ceremonies and funeral relics for the 6th Dung dkar, who had just died.⁵⁴⁷ In fact, at that time and ever since, great emphasis was laid on re-assembling many ritually important objects in order to enshrine them as *rten*.⁵⁴⁸

In 1991, the sDe dge and Nang chen areas were sighted by the 3rd Kong sprul Blo gros chos kyi seng ge (1954-1992), who had been living in exile. Not only did he bestow empowerments onto the sKyo brag reincarnates, but also inspired the construction of a new *sgrub khang* on a hill overlooking sPyi 'byams phug.⁵⁴⁹

In spite of this Karma pa influence or perhaps precisely due to their support, the 'Ba' rom pas today are struggling to remain their sectarian identity. Most local sources present their lineage continuity as “unbroken” (*rgyun ma chad pa*) and attribute its preservation (*'dzin pa*), revival (*srog mthud pa*) and protection (*mgon du grub pa*) to Tshangs gsar ba Blo gros rin chen and Ye shes rab rgyas.⁵⁵⁰ These recently deceased lamas were the senior holders of the esoteric knowledge substantial for the continuation of the transmission.⁵⁵¹ gSal byed is presented as the one who provided the monastic framework, upheld the local *sprul sku* tradition and has been spending an exemplary life in retreat.⁵⁵²

However, it is through the figure of gSal byed that the 'Ba' rom are gaining importance, independence, and centralizing their activity in sKyo brag, which could be viewed as the new “root” of the 'Ba' rom school. Over the centuries, the transmission was dissipated into the vast structure of the “'Ba' rom root and [its] branches” (*'Ba'rom rtsa lag*). Its former hub, the

⁵⁴⁶ Also see *Gendun Rinpoche von Tschodrak*: 18. This source reports on a rare statue of the Phyag bzhi pa which belonged to Ti shri ras pa.

⁵⁴⁷ See sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 305; however, there is considerable confusion concerning the data on the whole Dung dkar lineage all throughout this source.

⁵⁴⁸ sGa Karma don grub, et al. (1999: 305-306) devotes much space to describing restorative activities through the enumeration the re-assembled *rten*. Accordingly, the following relics were collected to serve as *sku rten*: the statues of Tilo pa, Nāro pa, Mar pa, Mi la ras pa, sGam po pa, statues of lamas of the Mahāmudrā lineage, Eight Aspects of Padmasambhava; Śākyamuni; Maitreya, etc. As *gsung rten*, works of the following masters were re-assembled were works of the 8th Karma pa, 'Ju Mi pham, 15th Karma pa, Ti shri ras pa, etc. In the role of *thugs rten*, the revivalists collected, among others: the funeral *stūpa* of a past gSal byed incarnate and of Ye shes Rab rgyas; *thang kas* and sacred objects like the image of Hevajra- *maṇḍala* given to sKyo brag Chos rje by the 'Jang sa tham ruler, footprint of the 5th Karma pa in stone, special relics connected with A khro ma, etc.

⁵⁴⁹ <http://www.jamgonkongtrul.org/namtha'r5.htm> (accessed 13.01.2011).

⁵⁵⁰ For the presentation of the lineage as unbroken see 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 1: 97; sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 303, Tshangs gsar 2005: 299.

⁵⁵¹ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 306.

⁵⁵² For gSal byed's lifestory see below.

sKu 'bum *dgon pa*, was destroyed by the Be ri forces in the 17th century and never rebuilt. Today, some of my informants claim that the doctrines and practices of this school are currently being re-established, not only at several sites across Nang chen, but also at the original 'Ba' rom seat in Nag chu ka in the TAR. However, it is still gSal byed rin po che, the principal authority for most 'Ba' rom activities and at his monastery of sKyo brag, who focuses the activity of the 'Ba' rom revival. Moreover, gSal byed's role was crucial in reinstalling other sites and infusing them with 'Ba' rom doctrines, such as in the case of Dwa lha sgam po in the TAR.⁵⁵³ Examples of sKyo brag centralization are provided below.

Although gSal dga' stays in permanent retreat in his residence above the monastery complex, religious activity at sKyo brag is blossoming under his direction. Monastic buildings and community have been restored, and the number of retreat facilities have probably increased in comparison to the pre-1950s figures.⁵⁵⁴ According to the manager-monk (*gnyer pa*) of the monastery, Tshogs gnyis nyi ma, the complex accommodates about 480 monks, 130 of which are currently in the *bshad grwa* and 46 in the *sgrub khang* for three-year retreat; 62 have finished this type of meditation training and 25 are currently preparing for the next intake of the new retreatants. There are 150 nuns in the nunnery, 21 of whom are in sealed retreat.⁵⁵⁵

Much of the livelihood of the monastic community depends on wealthy sponsors from Hong Kong, Singapore and mainland China – students of gSal dga'.⁵⁵⁶ The support of patrons is a rare case, and in the Nang chen area, most monks and nuns depend on their families or on regular begging rounds. However, what is even more striking is the ethnic background of many of these benefactors.

⁵⁵³ According to <http://www.baromkagyu.org/pageBK2.html> (accessed 02.03.2009). Moreover, Bardor Tulku (2010 b) asserts: "In addition, there are thirty-five other branch monasteries, which are a part of the Barom Kagyu. Most of them also have a three-year retreat facility and all of them practice the Barom Kagyu school according to the visionary lineage of Terchen Barway Dorje."

⁵⁵⁴ See below.

⁵⁵⁵ "In 1995 some nuns started to rebuild the retreat house in order to be able to do the three year, three month and three day retreats. Since 1995 there have been four, three year retreats with seventeen nuns in retreat each time. This retreat building is called Pema Choling. Another retreat building called Ngarong Dupdei Changchup Choling was started in 1999. All these three years retreatants have practiced the six Yogas and Mahamudra, which are special practices of the Kagyu tradition. When the nuns are in retreat they follow the three year retreat instruction of His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul." (<http://www.chodraknunnery.org/>, accessed 15.01.2011).

⁵⁵⁶ The nunnery also relies on individual donations, including those from the West. See <http://www.chodraknunnery.org/> (accessed 15.01.2011).

VII.1. The support of the Han elite

Parallel to the influence of the “Father State” described in Makley’s study on La brang, the role of Han Chinese in the contemporary revival in the sKyo brag area has also proven to be ironically affirmative.⁵⁵⁷ Under the rule of Deng Xiaoping, the Party liberalized its outlook on religion, which made it possible for Buddhism to be revived all throughout China. Deng’s policy of “reform and opening” enabled the reconstruction of local traditions, which largely resulted with the renewal of monasticism, exemplified by the monasteries founded on the holy mountains of Wutanshan or Emeishan.⁵⁵⁸ It also opened what Benoit Vermander and other scholars term a “religious economy” consisting of markets approved, ignored or outlawed by the state. The communist leaders recognized the moral value of religion in introducing order in a socialist society.⁵⁵⁹ What soon followed was an instrumentalization of religion, which put these markets under scrutiny and pressure to adapt to the political situation.

The corporatist approach in the expansion of these markets also suppresses individual needs, which is “seeking its proper place.”⁵⁶⁰ Hence, in a pluralist supply-and-demand situation, which articulates the multiplicity of interests in an open society, especially the urban and educated Chinese are free to choose their religion, and they are often inclined to opt for the Tibetan variety of Buddhism.⁵⁶¹

Gray Tuttle and others suppose that the renewed attention for Tibetan Buddhism among the Han, which began in the late 1970s, has been brought to an intensity unmatched since the Republican period.⁵⁶² In the field, I noticed that the donations of Han benefactors have been one of the major economic factors in rebuilding monasteries or, like in the case of sKyo brag, sponsoring their communities.⁵⁶³ To interpret this phenomenon, in his study from 1990, David Germano suggests a new chance for a Sino-Tibetan dialogue, which not only can occur beyond the reach of authority of the Chinese state, but possibly even speak against the state.⁵⁶⁴

Even if the Han are occasionally captivated by the “Tibetan” mythos of Shangri-La, their contribution to the revival in Khams is quite real. Here is what Jet Li, the Beijing-born Kung-

⁵⁵⁷ Another incongruity is that the new wave of enthusiasm for Tibetan Buddhism has arisen within the framework of the PRC’s post-colonial practice, expressed in the Han interest in the exotic “fringe” cultures in a similar way they sightsee Tibetan “ethnic villages” and “ethnic theme parks” described by Huber (2006: 23-28) and Makley (2007: 254).

⁵⁵⁸ See Qin 2000 and Vermander 2009: 8.

⁵⁵⁹ Vermander 2009: 10-11, Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 136 and Tuttle 2007: 224.

⁵⁶⁰ Vermander 2009: 12.

⁵⁶¹ See the statistics in Vermander 2009: 6.

⁵⁶² Tuttle 2007: 223. Compare also Tuttle 2007: 225 and Germano 1998: 84- 86.

⁵⁶³ Also see Germano 1998: 86.

⁵⁶⁴ Germano 1998: 87.

Fu film celebrity and a significant patron of bKa' brgyud pa lamas in the whole Nang chen region, said about his conversion to Tibetan Buddhism:

I'd come to realize that Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan social structure in general remain quite pure. By that I mean that people in that society their primary goal in life is not of self or material gain. When I was in Tibet a few months ago I noticed that they were holding massive prayer ceremonies praying for world peace and they do this quite often. Ironically not many people outside of their region know of what they are doing. Yet in spite of this lack of awareness by others, they have, and will continue to do, what they feel is the purpose of their life: to pray and send kind thoughts to others. That is why I chose Tibetan Buddhism.⁵⁶⁵

A Chinese donation also made it possible to construct the iconic edifice of the renaissance at sKyo brag – a copy of the famed Sras mkhar dgu thog, the tower built by Mi la ras pa for his teacher Mar pa.⁵⁶⁶ The tallest building in the complex is in fact a temple, whose nine stories contain painted clay statues assembled in such a way that they represent the different levels and aspects of Tantric practice; one of the floors is also used as classroom for the *bshad grwa* monks. The gigantic statue at the entrance is of the 'Ba' rom patriarch Dar ma dbang phyug; the other ones are grouped as gurus, *yi dam* deities, protectors, etc. They are mostly 'Ba' rom pa masters, but a photograph of the recently deceased Ris med/Karma pa saint Karma nor bu bzang po (1906/7-1984) is also on display on the floor containing guru images, situated right next to the statues of Mar pa, Mi la, and sGam po pa. This is an important detail, since, as I will demonstrate below, his influence in this area has been especially important.

One of the floors is dedicated solely to one “local saint,” the recently deceased Ye shes rab rgyas, whose life-size wax figure is seated on a throne, dressed in ceremonial robes and a hat. Even this statue was fashioned in China (possibly Chengdu) and looks very authentic. In the sections below, I shall account for the role that Ye shes rab rgyas had in the making of La phyi as local sacred ground.

But the Han Chinese at sKyo brag do not only act as sponsors and pilgrims. gSal byed rin po che also has several Han disciples who decided to wear the garb of Tibetan ascetics and are currently in sealed retreats in the *sgrub khangs* of the area.

VII.2.gNas, retreat and gTer ma: the new local interpretation of Ris med

Ye shes rab rgyas was a dedicated hermit, and sources like *Khams sgom sde* attribute the initial revival of retreat practice in the sKyo brag area to him. He was the one who re-installed

⁵⁶⁵ http://jetli.com/jet/index.php?l=en&s=spirit&ss=questions&p=x&date=011013_0221 (accessed 10.12.2010). Jet Li's main Buddhist teacher is Lho kun bzang rin po che of the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud dPal me *dgon* in Nang chen Shar mda'.

⁵⁶⁶ The original tower is located in Lho brag *rdzong*, TAR.

“summer retreats” for the monastic community (*dbyar gnas*), re-established two three-year retreat centers and the site for special solitary practice at Nyi zla phug.⁵⁶⁷ His disciple gSal byed continued his master’s tasks after the latter’s death in 1999. Today, there are twelve active meditation training facilities in and around sKyo brag.⁵⁶⁸

Moreover, at the nearby Khang ne dgon pa, an affiliate of sKyo brag, located a 60-minute walk outside the sKyo brag village, there are further 40 retreatants, including the ten in advanced retreat in solitary, sealed cabins. These meditators are also sponsored and instructed by sKyo brag reincarnates and Tshul khirms mthar phyin, whose closest *ras pa* disciple, dPal ldan chos skyong, has been in solitary, sealed retreat at Khang ne since 2004. Khang ne itself is a huge ‘Ba’ rom pa complex that was rebuilt in 1987; it houses 380 monks and includes a new *bshad grwa* and *sgrub grwa*. The monastic complex is presided over by the incarnate A bstan phun tshogs.⁵⁶⁹

This young lama, like all sKyo brag leaders, managed to connect with the yogin so important for the local revival. Karma nor bu seems to be sKyo brag’s guarantee of proper Tantric transmission and “unbroken connection” with the past. Until his death in 1984, Karma nor bu served as the main guru or important instructor to the most important revivalists today: gSal dga’, Tshul khirms mthar phyin, A bstan phun tshogs and the junior college lecturer dPa’ brtan.⁵⁷⁰

For all the significant input by Karma nor bu, who transmitted both the Six Yogas and Mahāmudrā in the Karma/ Zur mang bKa’ brgyud school, the necessary ‘Ba’ rom pa elements were provided by Ye shes rab rgyas. All the meditation schools of the sKyo brag area pride themselves on upholding the precepts of these transmissions.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁷ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 306.

⁵⁶⁸ Besides La phyi *sgom grwa*, which is not counted here since it is only loosely associated with sKyo brag, these retreat sites are: Ko rogs rdo rje brag; Ko rogs bkra shis mgo; Co ho nyin phug; rGyam rgyal mgul phug; Chab brag bde chen phug; sKyo nag chos rje mtshams phug; sPyi ‘byams nyi zla phug; Seng ge gnam rdzong; Bam chung ma (dPa’ ri pad ma chos rdzong) Pad sdong sgrub khang and ‘Ba’ rom sgrub khang; they house ca. 15-20 people each. Five of them are for monks, and seven for nuns. Moreover, Bardor Tulku (2009) reports: “[One more] retreat is also being created now in association with the Kyodrak monastery at the Kyodrak Peak (Kyodrak Utse). It is designed to be what we would call a postgraduate three-year retreat. To enter into that retreat the candidates must have done at least two or more three-year retreats and achieved the status of a retreat master. Thirteen such individuals will be selected and they will undertake this postgraduate retreat. The number is based upon the thirteen accomplished disciples of the dharma lord Sonam Zangpo who did retreat in the cave at Kyodrak Utse and for the sake of that auspicious connection, these thirteen postgraduate retreat masters will be in the [...] retreat.”

⁵⁶⁹ Khang ne was established in the 15th century by a local *siddha* who descended from the clan of Glang ras pa. sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 312-317.

⁵⁷⁰ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 315; dPa’ brtan & Dam chos zla ba 2007: 91.

⁵⁷¹ However, the Karma bKa’ brgyud impact is still present as we shall see in the example of the La phyi curriculum below.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin was the one disciple who was determined to follow in Karma nor bu's footsteps. He first lived in the Chab sti mountains alone, and in 2005 he established the constantly expanding La phyi *sgom grwa*. Its development is independent of the life of the monastery below, although by virtue of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's personal connection to gSal byed and the latter's support for the hermitage, it is also loosely affiliated with the sKyo brag monastic center.⁵⁷²

All of the ritual actions performed in the locality and described above contributed to the revival of sKyo brag as ritual territory. The history of this region as a pilgrimage destination did not only contain 'Ba' rom pa influences, but also maintained its status as "contested place." Today, the same 'Ba' rom pa, Karma pa, and gTer ma themes again coexist at the *gnas* of sPyi 'byams, Seng ge rdzong and Chab sti. The sites are extolled by modern local literary production, in oral discourse and celebrated in pilgrimage rites. In fact, much of sKyo brag's scriptural output is concerned with the local *gnas*, which are also mentioned in texts connected with the current hermitic activity in the area.⁵⁷³

A walk around the sPyi 'byams and Seng ge rdzong *gnas* with a prominent local monk, Zla ba bkra shis, and two other locals helped me identify the different strategies used in the reinstallation of the site as a pilgrimage destination. The sPyi 'byams cave is described as the venue where Padmasabhava accomplished the Amitāyus- *sādhana*. Lay people as well as monks frequently come here to collect tiny round stones which they claim are long-life pills (*tshe ril*). The cave is used by a lama who is here in semi-retreat and also teaches the Tibetan alphabet to two children.⁵⁷⁴ The black *stūpa*, attributed to Padmasambhava and mentioned by mChog gling and Kong sprul as the one that would produce relics after "Tibet and Khams was destroyed and their leaders came to harm" was rebuilt as if to fulfill their prophesy.⁵⁷⁵ All the miraculously arisen images, syllables, gTer revelation apertures (*gter sgo*), traces of demonic subjugation and supernatural acts performed by Padmasambhava, Chos rje or the 5th Karma pa are eulogized by the more educated pilgrims and in contemporary chronicles. The cave labyrinth is believed to be endowed with the power to liberate one after death in the *bar do*-

⁵⁷² The exact relationship with the monastery will also be explained below.

⁵⁷³ See gSal byed & dPa' brtan (n.d.): fol. 96.

⁵⁷⁴ I have seen hermits tutoring local children in reading and writing more often in Khams.

⁵⁷⁵ mChog gyur gling pa 1977: fols. 7-9. For the full passage on sKyo brag, see above for the historical descriptions of sKyo brag. As for Kong sprul and mChog gling's narrative maps, the fragments on sKyo brag are frequently reproduced in the local *gnas yig* and quoted by contemporary authors.

state, and a pilgrim is expected to crawl through some of them or perform other athletic feats at other caves of Seng ge rdzong.⁵⁷⁶

Through re-activation of mChog gling's narrative map at sKyo brag, a reconnection with the network of other power places in Khams is possible. In opposition to the official status of sKyo brag on the map of PRC, as the impoverished provincial township of Juela Xiang, sKyo brag has regained its status as the very first point on the narrative map of Eastern Tibet as sacred ground. In the post-Mao era, the register of the twenty-five *gnas* once again serves as argument in the debate on indigenous value and autonomy. As soon as Tibetan territories became incorporated into China, names for ethnic Tibetan areas were overwritten with Mandarin labels; at times even, monuments of Chinese Communism were employed in the role of topographic reference points.⁵⁷⁷ Thus, mChog gling's network can be symbolically juxtaposed against the monopoly of Chinese state cartography that has mapped the Tibetan world with the help of its own categories.

VII.3. Global influence at sKyo brag

A unique blend of local ritual traditions is manifesting in the sKyo brag landscape also through transnational influence. In 2009, Bardor Tulku of Red Hook, New York, the reincarnation of 'Bar ba'i rdo rje was invited by the sKyo brag abbot and observed the emergence of a new ritual feature of the Seng ge rdzong *gnas*:

Chodrak (=sKyo brag) is the place where we chanted the prayers [composed by Bardor Tulku Rinpoche] for the first time. We had good signs that day. After we left Tibet and came back to the U.S., people started seeing the image of Guru Rinpoche emerging from the wall. Each person sees it differently; some people see the eyes open, some people see the eyes closed, some people see the face upfront, and some people see it from the profile. It is happening in the part of the Chodrak complex [...]—in a very special place for three-year retreat. [...] This one is special because Chodrak Saga Rinpoche (=sKyo brag gSal dga' rin po che) wanted this to be a retreat only for teachers, people who have already done two or three three-year retreats and can bring benefit to the Barom lineage by leading other retreatants. [...] The image of the face of Guru Rinpoche is emerging from the wall in the shrine room of that special three-year retreat. Now the place has been sealed, no one is allowed to go in there. Before they sealed it, many people from Sholda (=Shar mda') went to see the emerging image.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁶ Compare the revived pilgrimage practice and similar ritual in this context in Huber 2006: 13.

⁵⁷⁷ Tibetan maps are rare; moreover, since they are issued almost exclusively by the Amye Machen Institute based in Dharamsala, they are unavailable in the PRC. For this reason, not only Chinese, but even Western tourists have widely adopted the Chinese terminology to describe the ethnic Tibetan areas. See Huber 2006: 28 and Gyurme Dorje 1999: 653.

⁵⁷⁸ Bardor Tulku 2009.

With the advent of the communist Chinese in sKyo brag, its heritage had been buried into the landscape. It was only recently that local traditions could effectively become restored to validity by means of such “self-arisen,” gTer-like revelations.

Using the example of post-Mao gTer, Germano discussed how such practices reaffirm the local community’s ties to their native land and that any effort directed at the reawakening of the consecrated landscape will simultaneously become a historical claim of the indigenous folk to their territory.⁵⁷⁹ However, what is especially intriguing in this case is that this particular revelation was animated by a lama who had left Khams in 1959 as a nine-year-old child, was educated in Sikkim and since the 1980s has been living and engaging in teaching a broad audience consisting of mostly non-Tibetans in the United States.⁵⁸⁰

sKyo brag as the new “’Ba’ rom root” is clearly focusing most of the activity of the school also by attracting the attention of the exiled ’Ba’ rom pa lineage holders and their Karma pa supporters. What started in the 1980s with the visit of Si tu pa, who replenished its monastic community and named new reincarnates, was continued with the call of the 3rd Kong sprul, who supplied Tantric empowerments and inspired the construction of a *sgrub khang*.⁵⁸¹ Nowadays, it is Bardor Tulku who carries on with this legacy.

At the same time, as the seemingly unyielding borders of the PRC become permeable, the revival has lost its isolated status. The traditional elite based in exile receive the chance to influence the growth of Buddhist practice more or less indirectly, as they bring along another factor – that of a global network.

In 1959 and in the following years, when a large segment of Tibetan Buddhist leaders escaped the communist regime, they went to the different Asian countries, but also to Europe, America and Australia, where they aroused a great deal of interest. As a consequence, Tibetan Buddhism today becomes what Samuel terms “a world religion.”⁵⁸² The lamas, who have been tolerated in the People’s Republic since the early 1980s during their inspections of their “traditional” communities of followers are also same teachers whose personal histories were often formed by Western thought and global events; many of these lamas were educated in Indian boarding-schools or by private tutors with international backgrounds. What is more, their activities, publicized on World Wide Web, include tending to a wide-reaching audience of followers, who form communities of “dharma centers” represented in Europe, the

⁵⁷⁹ Compare Kapstein 1998: 143.

⁵⁸⁰ For the organization he founded, see <http://www.kunzang.org/> (accessed 01.02.2011).

⁵⁸¹ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 316.

⁵⁸² Samuel 2005: 288-316.

Americas, Australia, Asia and at Internet sites. The significant feature of these networks is their international character, which encompasses both Asian and Western constituents. They are usually presided over by a Tibetan teacher.⁵⁸³

Members of those centers are often encouraged to make donations for the benefit of the PRC religious revival – so that their teacher’s original monastery or retreat place can be sustained. Such “sponsor-a-monk/nun” programs can be found all over the Internet.⁵⁸⁴ In consequence, some Western Buddhist converts journey to sKyo brag to visit the birth area of their teacher, like the disciples of lama Gendun who have been travelling to Khams since 1980. Even the most isolated places such as Chab sti have received Western guests on at least one occasion. In 2006, several American students of Akong Tulku (b.1939), founder of the “Samye Ling” global network of Buddhist centers, arrived at La phyi *sgom grwa* to meet Tshul khrim mthar phyin, the “local saint.”⁵⁸⁵

A further example of international influence that turns the remote sKyo brag region into a venue for global exchange is the input of Sonam Tenzin Rinpoche (=bSod nams bstan ’dzin Rin po che, b.1971), a recent refugee and ’Ba’ rom pa incarnate who contributes to the sKyo brag revival with his visits,⁵⁸⁶ charity work and donations. He currently lives in Australia and also founded a number of “*dharma* centers” in Australia and Malaysia. His biography is directed to the international audience and was therefore composed in English and Mandarin. It expounds upon his training in the sKyo brag hermitages and at the monastery.⁵⁸⁷

In the recent years, Sonam Tenzin’s disciples designed an Internet site, which presents a continuity of transmission stretching from sKyo brag to the newly founded centers in the Western world.⁵⁸⁸ It retells the history of sKyo brag *dgon*, relates on its current activity and posts photographs of the reinstalled relics and places it in the context of international activities of the ’Ba’ rom lineage holders. What is even more intriguing is the fact that the website also presents photographs of the local saints Ye shes rab rgyas and Tshul khrim

⁵⁸³ Samuel 2005: 288-316.

⁵⁸⁴ Also for sKyo brag. See “Chodrak Nunnery Fund Raising” at <http://www.baromkagyu.org/pageBK6.html> (accessed 01.02.2010).

⁵⁸⁵ I suppose the contact was made possible through mKhan po Dam chos zla ba, the director of the sKyo brag *bshad grwa*, who teaches at Akong’s centers around the world. For the term “local saint,” see below.

⁵⁸⁶ “Yushu Earthquake and relief trip” at http://www.baromkagyu.org/tibet_trip.html (accessed 14.07.2010). Also see “Bardor Tulku Rinpoche at Kyodrak Monastery in Tibet in 2009,” at <http://www.kunzang.org/photo-galleries/kpl-2009/2009-08-30-btr-at-kyodrak/btr-at-kyodrak.html> (accessed 09.03.2012).

⁵⁸⁷ “Biography of the 4th Venerable Sonam Tenzin Rinpoche.”

⁵⁸⁸ See <http://www.baromkagyu.org/index.html> (accessed 01.02.2010), and <http://www.chodraknunnery.org/> (accessed 01.02.2011).

mthar phyin. The caption below their scanned photographs, taken in the caves and in the retreat environment of Chab sti, reads:

Venerable Yeshe Rabje (=Ye shes rab rgyas) and Venerable Chadral Tsultrim Tarchen (=Bya bral Tshul khrims mthar phyin) at Barom Dharma Wangchuk's first monastery. Both are considered living saints.⁵⁸⁹

The website promotes the sponsorship of Sonam Tenzin's Me thi dge nunnery and the adjacent retreat at sKyo brag, but also shows how Sonam Tenzin's Australian disciples travel to Eastern Tibet to assist with the charity and medical work that his sKyo brag-based associates oversee.⁵⁹⁰ At the same time, his 21 nun students, who are currently in retreat, are being instructed by the local "living saint," Tshul khrims mthar phyin.⁵⁹¹

The global Tibetan Buddhist network, active at sKyo brag, encompasses numerous distinct influences such as the religious activists within the PRC, Westerners, the Tibetan diaspora, the Taiwan and Hong Kong audiences and Chinese dissident intellectuals. As these influences meet, not only does the revival develop a new dimension in front of a world-wide audience, but also, with its active support, the Tibetan Buddhists of sKyo brag become "dynamic agents who construct as much as they are constructed."⁵⁹²

VII.3.1. The 'Ba' rom *smon lam*: celebrating the (global) sectarian identity

Even if the revival and expansion of the 'Ba' rom is visible in the sKyo brag landscape, one of its most striking illustrations is a calendar event. The 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud Prayer Festival (*smon lam*) focuses lineage power from the entire region and from the exiled communities in one spot and at one particular period of time.

Since the early 1980s, when religious congregations became legal in the Tibetan regions, similar festivals have been popular throughout Khams as mass celebrations of local history and sectarian identity. In the Nang chen area, *smon lam* is organized annually by the different Buddhist schools.⁵⁹³

⁵⁸⁹ "Chodrak Monastery" at <http://www.baromkagyuu.org/pageBK3.html> (accessed 24.10.2010).

⁵⁹⁰ "Khenpo Dam Cho Dawa Rinpoche and Chodrak orphanage" at <http://www.baromkagyuu.org/pageBK4.html> accessed 14.07.2010.

⁵⁹¹ See an Internet page that shows a nun sitting in her meditation box with a *thang ka*-style poster of Tshul khrims mthar phyin pinned to the wall above her meditation box, at "Poor conditions of old nunnery quarters," at http://www.chodraknunnery.org/nuns_retreats.html, (accessed 03.02.2011).

⁵⁹² Germano 1998: 86.

⁵⁹³ However, large religious congregations and mass visits to pilgrimage sites have again become a sensitive issue and subject to government repression in the areas of A mdo and Khams areas since the 2008 post-olympic

The 'Ba' rom festival was first initiated by gSal dga' between August 27 and September 3 in 2009.⁵⁹⁴ The aforementioned Bardor Tulku was requested by gSal byed to visit from the U.S. as a guest of honor. According to Bardor Tulku's relations, the eight-day-long ceremony was attended by crowds of lay people, approximately 1,500 monks and nuns, 15 reincarnate lamas and 35 *mkhan pos*. A special temple had been built to accommodate the participants.⁵⁹⁵ The first five days were dedicated to practices outlined in the *smon lam* chant book, which had been especially prepared by gSal byed for this occasion. The festival celebrations were held from 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. and included chanting a variety of prayers included in the songbook – from the more general verses of auspiciousness (*bkra shis*), through lineage supplications (*smon lam/gsol 'debs*), invocations of deities and *bodhisattvas*, and the *guruyoga* on 'Ba' rom Dar ma dBang phyug followed by *tshogs*. Aspiration prayers (*smon lam*) were followed by chanting supplications (*gsol 'debs*) to Mar pa, Mi la ras pa and other patriarchs. The five days organized around this schedule were concluded with three days of collective Amitābha practice.⁵⁹⁶

VII.3.1.1. The new “Ris med” of sKyo brag

The *smon lam* chant book, entitled *dPal ldan 'ba' rom bka' brgyud kyi smon lam chen mo'i zhal 'don*, provides several good examples of self-authorization strategies used in the revival.⁵⁹⁷ Since no living 'Ba' rom pa lineage holder can empower the revivalists to perform their tasks, they are employing a technique popular in the ethno-religious revival in Khams – they insist on a connection with local and broader “tradition,” especially a connection with the masters and lineages who supported the 'Ba' rom pas in the past.

For virtually all practice lineages, the broad understanding of the religious tradition often means contextualization within the legacy of the Ris med movement. In the sKyo brag revival, recalling the authority of Ris med is a complex strategy that exceeds mere rhetoric.

At a first glance, it is already apparent that *dPal ldan 'ba' rom bka' brgyud kyi smon lam chen mo'i zhal 'don* has had a considerable amount of contribution from Kong sprul, mKhyen

uprising. Thus, several public empowerments and religious congregations are reported to have been banned in Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu, and the La brang monastery remained closed to tourism for much of 2008.

⁵⁹⁴ This is after my fieldwork period was completed. However, since the first *smon lam* had been carefully planned years before and contains so many striking features that present my case study of La phyi in a wider context, I will briefly analyze the role of the 'Ba' rom *smon lam* below.

⁵⁹⁵ Tshul khri mthar phyin was not present; he was teaching at Dwa lha sgam po (TAR).

⁵⁹⁶ It is not clear whether it was 'pho ba practice or the *sādhana*. See “Bardor Tulku Rinpoche at Kyodrak Monastery (August 2009)” at <http://kunuzang.org/news-2009.html> (accessed 15.01.2011).

⁵⁹⁷ gSal byed & dPa' brtan 2009. The 1st 'Bar ba'i rdo rje was the one who compiled the first 'Ba' rom *smon lam* songbook, this one however, was edited by the local yogin-scholars gSal byed rin po che and dPa' brtan mkhan po. Compare Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 171.

brtse and mChog gling in the form of wishing-prayers (*smon lam*), supplications (*gsol 'debs*) and chanted liturgies (*bklag thabs*).⁵⁹⁸ Many of these texts were composed by the Ris med master at their *gnas*/hermitages of Tsā 'dra; rDzong gsar bkra shis lha rtse or Seng chen gnam brag. One of the compositions by Kong sprul, reproduced for the *smon lam* is in fact “a long-life wishing prayer for the holders of teachings without bias” (*ris med pa'i bstan 'dzin gyi zhab brtan smon tshig*).⁵⁹⁹

The Prayer Festival cites Ris med in many ways, not just by replicating scriptures authored by the creators of the movement. The influence of the Ris med legacy prevails at sKyo brag in those who created the concept of the annual ceremony and contribute to the 'Ba' rom revival in a broader manner. One must not forget that Karma nor bu, root guru to gSal byed (as well as the root guru of Tshul khri ms mthar phyin), for all his Karma bKa' brgyud pa background, was commonly referred to and celebrated as a “Ris med teacher.”⁶⁰⁰ Moreover, Bardor Tulku, invited to support the *smon lam* and brought into Khams from his center in the U.S., is a reincarnate of 'Bar ba'i rdo rje, the Ris med revivalist active at sKyo brag.

Thus, the new revival directly legitimizes the novelty of its projects by drawing on an earlier wave of restoration. What is more, today's revival, which occurs after the inertia and devastation of the Maoist period, bears many similarities with the Ris med era. Collecting extinct material and oral lineages, compiling them into large anthologies or channeling them into one site in order to secure their survival, as well as cooperating between the different sects, are traits of the 19th-century religious restoration and of the present revival in Khams.

The *smon lam* songbook draws on another proven strategy that the 'Ba' rom pas have used in the past to regain their waning power. Through the reproduction of prayers addressed to the twelve bKa' brgyud pa sects or authored by the various Karma pas, 'Bri gung masters, etc., the 'Ba' rom pas are drawing on their old corporate identity, known from the historical presence of the different doctrinal forces at sKyo brag.⁶⁰¹ Whether the role of other schools, especially the Karma pa institution, has been to overpower or to support the 'Ba' rom, reinvoking the entire setup today becomes an important technique of emphasizing the traditional mosaic of indigenous influences present at sKyo brag – in opposition to China's ideology of a uniform culture, particularly true during the Maoist period.

⁵⁹⁸ gSal byed & dPa' brtan 2009, 61-62, 67-70, 72-86, 130-158, 207-209. That amounts to 43 pages out of a total of 215 pages.

⁵⁹⁹ Kong sprul 2009: 62-65.

⁶⁰⁰ See above for Kar nor's lifestory.

⁶⁰¹ Additional examples of important Karma pa influences are provided in the curriculum of La phyi.

In modern China, the rhetoric of diversity is designed by the state in order to maintain control over the monumental political organism of the PRC, but also to “package and sell” ethnic and religious minorities as expressed by Epstein and Wenbin.⁶⁰² The Party-state has assumed the role of authority in creating norms for religions and mediating the mutual relationships between religious and ethnic groups.⁶⁰³ Thus, the locality has lost its influence in determining religious identity, and through accentuating the complexity and historical interdependence of both divisive and uniting local differences, the sKyo brag revivalists are working towards the goal of the indigenous cultural revival.

There are many instances of beyond-sectarian cooperation at sKyo brag that go beyond the mutual support within the broader bKa’ brgyud pa complex. Grub chen Karma nor bu, both role model and antecedent for the local revival, was known for accepting disciples of all schools, since his own Ris med training could compensate for the deficiency of qualified Tantric masters, who at the same time had kept their *samaya* vows intact. In this way, in the 1980s, Karma nor bu’s sKyo brag disciples and some of the high lamas of the monastery, like gSal byed or Sonam Tenzin, did not just receive the traditional ’Ba’ rom and Karma bKa’ brgyud training, but additionally obtained some rNying ma pa education.⁶⁰⁴

Moreover, when Tshul khrims mthar phyin gained fame as Six Yogas instructor, he was invited by a Sa skya/Ris med master yogin Chos dbyings rdor je to give teachings at his meditation school linked to the Thub bstan dar rgyas gling convent in the sKye dgu mdo region.

As for A bstan phun tshogs, I was informed that he had studied at the gSer rta institute,⁶⁰⁵ which is open to students from all schools, yet specializes in the Ātiyoga curriculum. This connection was commemorated in an unusual way – mKhan po ’Jigs med phun tshogs’ cabin was offered to the young sKyo brag reincarnate, disassembled, transported across Khams from the far east to the north-west, and re-assembled again on Khang ne monastery premises. Now it is used as A bstan’s personal retreat hut.

mKhan po ’Jigs phun’s cabin marks the sKyo brag landscape as a direct indication of the beyond-sectarian cooperation taking place in the area. This collaboration fueled the scholastic

⁶⁰² Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 136-137; also see Huber 2006: 23-28.

⁶⁰³ Also see Vermander 2009.

⁶⁰⁴ Sonam Tenzin learned from mKhan chen Pad ma tshe dbang, abbot of the rDzogs chen Shri Singha college. See Biography of the 4th Venerable Sonam Tenzin Rinpoche,” 8.

⁶⁰⁵ gSer rta bla rung sgar, estimated as the largest Buddhist community in the Tibetan world and famous for the quality of schooling also among exiled Tibetans, is a monastic academy in Sichuan. For a study on gSer rta and its founder mKhan po ’Jigs med phun tshogs see Germano 1998. During my short visit to gSer rta in late November 2007, I estimated the number of its inhabitants at roughly 20.000. Also see Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 88-89.

revival as well, since one of the new-generation *bshad grwa* instructors and important local author, mKhan po dPa' brtan, has also gone to gSer rta to study with 'Jigs phun himself and other rNying ma pa experts.⁶⁰⁶

In the following sections, I will describe the case study of La phyi *sgom grwa*, which closely collaborates with the rNying ma pa meditation school of Ya chen in gSer rta area on many levels, and as such is a particularly good example of the non-sectarian nature of the revival.

VII.3.1.1.1. The scholar-yogins of sKyo brag

The revival of scholasticism throughout Khams and other Tibetan areas has been described by Germano, Kolås and others, mostly via the example of the gSer rta Institute. Both of these sources along with several exiled scholars confirm that the academy has reached the highest intellectual standards, which outshine great institutes of Tibetan Buddhist learning in India or Nepal.⁶⁰⁷ In spite of the apparent informality, illustrated by the virtual lack of entry requirements for meditation schools, as well as the flexibility of ecumenical approach, the level of both scholastic and meditation training in Khams is becoming acknowledged among the diaspora – and gSer rta is only one example of this.

This dissertation focuses on the training of hermits, but in the current passage I would like to point out the interdependence of academic and yogic efforts for the sKyo brag revival, which surrounds the case study of La phyi *sgom grwa*.

Apart from the Legs bshad gling *bshad grwa*, which re-opened around 1982, there is one other college in sKyo brag – at the Khang ne monastery.⁶⁰⁸ Since the 'Ba' rom is an esoteric practice lineage, its masters did not produce philosophical treatises. Therefore, the intellectual training at sKyo brag resembles any bKa' brgyud pa curriculum, with the Mahāyanā texts like the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatara*, *rGyal sras lag len*, scriptures belonging to the Prajñāpāramitā-cycle, as well as a special program dedicated to the study of the textual tradition of Mar pa Lo tsā ba.⁶⁰⁹

The sKyo brag *bshad grwa* director mKhan po dPa' brtan believes that intellectual schooling is the necessary prerequisite for meditation in retreat, something which my

⁶⁰⁶ dPa' brtan & Dam chos zla ba 2007: 91.

⁶⁰⁷ See Kolås & Thowsen 2005, Germano 1998.

⁶⁰⁸ The classes are still taking place in the old building, but a new large building is constructed 30 minutes outside of the Khang ne premises and the students are expected to move in soon.

⁶⁰⁹ "Biography of the 4th Venerable Sonam Tenzin Rinpoche" contains the rough outline of the *bshad grwa* curriculum. Also see "Chodrak Monastery" at <http://www.baromkagyu.org/pageBK3.html> (accessed 24.10.2010).

informants from the hermitages above the college do not always agree with. However, the *bshad grwa* students are obliged to take meditation classes already during the study period and for some of them, it will become a way to increase their appetites for more intense training. In order to do this, they can join one of the twelve functioning retreat venues in the area. Other career options, which unite the *clerical* and the *shamanic*, is teaching at retreat sites.

It is not uncommon that the graduates lecture or settle at meditation schools, institutes, or monasteries, which have a different sectarian background than their own. This is one of the ways in which the serious shortage of qualified instructors is dealt with across many religious educational venues in Khams. La phyi itself is regularly supported with courses offered by young lama-scholars from Ya chen, a mixture of an institute and meditation school in the nomadic regions of Sichuan.⁶¹⁰

sKyo brag has become the scene for a major scriptural revival. The mentioned mKhan po dPa' brtan, the senior mKhan po Dam chos zla ba, together with gSal byed, are the main local authors and editors. At the same time, these lamas are recounted among the disciples of the charismatic Karma nor bu and the local saint Ye shes rab rgyas. The latter's biography is currently being composed by *mkhan po* Dam chos zla ba,⁶¹¹ whose other works on ritual and philosophy are registered in the digital Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center archive on the Internet.⁶¹² The ritual texts authored or edited with the help of the local hermit-yogins are put to use in the hermitages of sKyo brag; I will examine one such specimen in the section on scriptures used at the meditation school of La phyi.

Apart from the inclination for the *clerical-shamanic* synthesis in the style of the Ris med masters, there is an additional aspect of the scholastic and scriptural revival worth mentioning. When portraying local lineage holders, the new religious chronicles (*lo rgyus*) describing Nang chen and sKyo brag, also include the exiled teachers. Thus, they present the lineages as uninterrupted.⁶¹³ For example, the first pages of *Khams sgom sde nang chen pa'i dgon khag* do not only show photographs of regional monasteries, hermitages and their patron lamas, but also photos of those, who have lived outside Khams for their entire life.⁶¹⁴ Linking lineage holders from abroad with the 'Ba' rom revival within the PRC constitutes another strategy for

⁶¹⁰ The exact nature of this cooperation and its consequences will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁶¹¹ According to Sonam Tenzin (oral communication from 13.03.2008).

⁶¹² http://www.tbrc.org/#library_person_Object-P9469, s.v. Dam chos zla ba (accessed 15.12.2010).

⁶¹³ For the lifestory of Si tu pa Padma Don yod (b.1954) who escaped Tibet in infancy, see Karma rgyal mtshan 2007: 293-347. Also see Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 86.

⁶¹⁴ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999 (contained in the non-paginated photograph section at the beginning of the text).

the revival of the continuity of that school. It is a declaration of the value of the local tradition as the main source of authority in the face of the boundaries and limitations imposed by the state, which Tibetans, both within and outside of the borders are unwilling to accept. Since the revival was launched and is directed mainly by local clergy, the sKyo brag gSal byed and his disciples and colleagues, it is also a statement of autonomy and capability *vis-à-vis* the voices in the diaspora trying to discredit the revivalist efforts on grounds of the shortage of leaders as well as the *samaya*-breaches and ruptures in the cultural flow that occurred during the Cultural Revolution.

VII.3.1.1.1.1. The life of gSal byed rin po che

The agency of the main scholar-yogin of sKyo brag gSal byed rin po che (also known as the sKyo brag gSal dga'), is vital for the local restorative activities at the monastery and also at the hermitages around it – including La phyi. For this reason I will now introduce him in greater detail. The following biography was composed on the basis of local sources and interviews.

The current gSal dga' was born in 1955 as the 9th gSal byed incarnation,⁶¹⁵ one of the three most important lineages of sKyo brag and a re-embodiment of Glang ras pa, founder of sKyo brag monastery.⁶¹⁶ At the age of three, he was recognized and enthroned by the 16th Karma pa and 11th Si tu pa and received the name Karma sGrub brgyud bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan. His first important teacher was the sKyo brag siddha Ye shes rab rgyas, whose "geomantic insight" later contributed to the landscape of La phyi *sgom grwa*. However, it was Karma nor bu who became the root guru for gSal byed. When the worst turmoil of the Tibetan Revolt (1956-9)⁶¹⁷ launched in response to the "democratic reforms" and collectivization passed, the young incarnate took preliminary ordination (*dge tshul*) under the legendary "Second Mi la ras pa," Karma nor bu.⁶¹⁸

In fact, after the official launch of the religious revival movement for Qinghai in 1980, several other sKyo brag lamas are noted to have been sent by gSal byed to receive teachings on the Six Yogas from Karma nor bu during the four years until the latter's death – the later junior *mkhan po* of the *bshad grwa* included.⁶¹⁹

Both my informants, as well as written sources available on gSal dga's life diplomatically omit discussing the fate of this master during the turbulent time of the Cultural Revolution. Like in other examples of local saints discussed in this

⁶¹⁵ Not to be mistaken with another gSal byed of the Nang chen region, compare 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 338-339.

⁶¹⁶ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 300-301.

⁶¹⁷ sGa Karma don grub, et al. (1999) repeatedly gives the year 1958 as the worst for the sKyo brag region. Compare W.W. Smith 1994: 61-67.

⁶¹⁸ It is interesting to note that when describing the training of gSal byed in the time of famine that followed the Great Leap Forward, sGa Karma don grub, et al. (1999: 301) extols Karma nor bu's ability to survive on stones and spring water; it is as if his ascetic skills could help him survive in the time of the famine.

⁶¹⁹ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 304, dPa' brtan & Dam chos zla ba 2007: 91.

dissertation, such as Tshul khrims mthar phyin or Karma nor bu, biographers were determined to leave out the details that might be embarrassing or polluting for the reputation of the great lama. Thus, gSal dga's official biography leaps from 1960 to 1985, when the 12th Si tu pa, who had fled to India at the age of six, appeared in Tibetan areas for the first time.⁶²⁰ On that occasion, in the presence of a large monastic assembly, gSal byed renewed his *dge slong* vows; he was resolved to follow Si tu's order to pass them on to others.⁶²¹

In fact, together with Dung dkar 6th, gSal dga' helped to reestablish the monastic community in 1980.⁶²² It was then that gSal byed became the abbot of the monastery.

Later he also met another prominent Karma bKa' brgyud pa lama, educated in exile, whom he counts among his gurus. The 3rd Kong sprul travelled throughout Khams in 1991 and while at sKyo brag, he suggested new places for three-year retreat enclosures to be constructed. gSal dga' carried out the wish and today, the monks at the *sgrub khang* of sKyo brag also house two ethnic Han trainees. In fact, as head of the monastery, revivalist of the 'Ba' rom school and famous hermit, gSal byed rin po che has many Han disciples. His journey to Taiwan brought a great deal of funds to the monastery. One of the Chinese disciples financed the construction of the copy of the Sras khar dgu thog tower at the main temple.

gSal dga's other gurus include Tshangs gsar Blo gros rin chen (dates unknown), a *sngags pa* 'Ba' rom lineage holder and an important local historian. gSal byed also learned from several rNying ma masters of both bKa' ma and gTer ma lineages.⁶²³ As a dedicated hermit, gSal dga' used all the important local caves for retreat, including Chab sti's Golden Cave; it was also he who first guided Tshul khrims mthar phyin to the *gnas* and suggested the latter stay there. In this way, gSal dga' directly contributed to the later establishment of the La phyi hermitage.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin and gSal dga' travelled together to more remote pilgrimage places like Ti se, Lho brag, Dwags lha sgam po, Brag yer pa or bSam yas, where they devoted themselves to ascetic practice (*dka' ba spyad*) and the Six Yogas.⁶²⁴

gSal byed is the source of Refuge and ordination vows for many in the region. In the sKyo brag-affiliated retreat sites, he gives many empowerments, scriptural transmissions and oral instructions (*dbang lung khrid*), necessary for their practice.

O rgyan phrin las (b.1985), the young lama enthroned in exile as the 17th Karma pa by the 12th Si tu and the Dalai Lama bestowed upon him an honorific title. His other significant connection to the Tibetan diaspora includes the re-introduction of Bardor Tulku, the third incarnation of gTer chen 'Bar ba'i rdo rje, based in the U.S., into the ritual landscape of sKyo brag. sKyo brag gSal dga' invited Bardor

⁶²⁰ sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 301. Compare "Biographies: His Eminence the 12th Khentin Tai Si tu Rinpoche" at <http://www.dharmafellowship.org/biographies/contemporarymasters/khentin-tai-si-tu.htm> (accessed 11.12.2010).

⁶²¹ Compare Germano 1998: 70.

⁶²² sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 304-305.

⁶²³ Tshangs gsar Blo gros rin chen is an author cited frequently in this thesis (Tshangs gsar 2005). His writings form a vital basis for other chronicles of the Nang chen region, for instance: sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999, 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997,1 and sKu rgyal 1982. On Tshangs gsar's life and activity, see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 334-338.

⁶²⁴ See sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 302.

Tulku to be the guests of honor at the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud *smon lam* taking place at sKyo brag. Since 2009, gSal byed has also been the main architect of this grand ceremony, involving almost 2000 people.

As it has been explained, gSal dga's goal is the revival of the 'Ba' rom school; his attempts at achieving it resemble the activities of the Ris med masters in many ways. gSal byed is a prolific writer and editor. He authored several ritual texts (among others, a *guruyoga- sādhanā* on Karma nor bu), lyrical pieces, scholastic treatises and historiographic texts on sKyo brag.⁶²⁵

As the most experienced of the sKyo brag reincarnates, the supreme abbot of the monastery, as well as the key figure in the 'Ba' rom revival, gSal byed remains in the center of religious activity in the region. All of these factors have made him the unofficial, contemporary head of the 'Ba' rom school. He has even been referred to as such by some of my informants.

Although he is in life retreat (*tshe mtshams*), he lives in his residence above the monastery grounds, devoting one single day per month (the 15th) for audiences, the full moon day according to the Tibetan calendar. On these occasions, the corridors to his audience room fill with monks, nuns, and lay people, who have various requests. During the audiences, he usually keeps some sacred substances within reach to be given to the devotees.⁶²⁶

⁶²⁵ See *Grub pa'i dbang phyug karma gzhan phan chos kyi rgya mtsho'i rnam thar* (n.d.), dPa' brtan & Dam chos zla ba 2007, gSal byed & dPa' brtan 2009.

⁶²⁶ When I received an audience in 2008, I was given a long-life pill (*tshe ril*) and a consecrated, protective knot (*srung mdud*).

*The name you are described with is Mi la ras pa,
In the three conditioned worlds, just [to hear] your name is precious.
Dressed in a single cotton robe, [you are] radiant like the moon;
[Such is] the sign of the supreme inner blaze of caṇḍālī.⁶²⁷*
Kong sprul

VIII. Establishing La phyi sgom grwa

In order to understand the establishment, structure and functioning of the meditation school of La phyi, it is necessary to initially delve into the life story and lineage of its founder, the *ras pa* Tshul khrims mthar phyin. In common with the achievements of the Thai meditation masters described by Tambiah, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's hermitage and the spatial-ritual construction of the power place is mainly his own creation.⁶²⁸ It is Tshul khrims mthar phyin's agency, his charisma and reemployment of powerful symbols rooted in the Tantric tradition of Tibet in general, as well as the celebrated religious past of sKyo brag in particular, that shaped the cosmology of the La phyi training complex and also reawakened the local structures, which traditionally support hermitages. Tshul khrims mthar phyin's agency emphasizes the unbroken connection with the past through the link with his guru, Karma nor bu bzang po, who had endured the Cultural Revolution in hiding.⁶²⁹

It is true that sKyo brag gSal byed's confirmation of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's ritual accomplishment was instrumental for the latter's career as a guru. Although he is hailed as the modern Mi la ras pa of Khams, much like the famous renunciate himself, Tshul khrims mthar phyin owes his initial empowerment to no-one but himself.

VIII.1. The founder of La phyi: The *ras pa* Tshul khrims mthar phyin

No written source exists for Tshul khrims mthar phyin's biography and he himself refused to answer most questions related to his life. The life story below was compiled from several testimonies of close family members, local teachers and Tshul khrims mthar phyin's disciples, and then double-checked for discrepancies.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁷ *mtshan brjod na mi la ras pa zhes// mtshan tsam yang 'jig rten gsum na dkon// ras rkyang pa zla ba'i 'od mdangs can// nang mchog gi gtum mo 'bar ba'i rtag//* (Kong sprul 2007:1).

⁶²⁸ Tambiah 1988: 286.

⁶²⁹ The latter master is famed to have trained many of today's important teachers of different sectarian affiliations of Tibetan Buddhism in the PRC. His biography will be quoted later in this chapter.

⁶³⁰ According to Tshul khrims bdud 'dul, A bstan Phun tshog is currently composing Tshul khrims mthar phyin's biography. However, Tshul khrims mthar phyin himself remarked that one of his closest disciples, the meditation instructor (*sgrub dpon*) Shes rab nyi ma, who also teaches at other sKyo brag *sgrub khangs*, is the most informed

Tshul khirms mthar phyin⁶³¹ was born in 1947 in the village of Kha cham,⁶³² located around twenty kilometers from sKyo brag through mountain passes and one hour walk to the major Karma bKa brgyud monastery of gNas mdo.⁶³³ The whole area is located approximately three hours by car outside of the town of Nang chen Shar mda'.⁶³⁴

Little is known about the master's childhood and youth in the Maoist era. He was the middle of at least three children, went to state school where he learned some spoken and written Mandarin and was made to memorize Marxist doctrines. When he was eighteen, he married bSod nams dbyangs 'dzom, who was the same age and whose family lived in the neighborhood.⁶³⁵ Together they had seven children: three daughters and four sons, one of which had died in infancy.⁶³⁶ As a layman, Tshul khirms mthar phyin was valued for his kindness. He was said to have never hunted nor killed household animals. Instead, he protected them from being slaughtered.

Having received some training in accounting at the township, sometime during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Tshul khirms mthar phyin was elected the village *dpon po* and Kha cham's accountant, second-in-charge. The *dpon po* post obviously changed in the changing times of collective farming. In Mao's time, a *dpon po* received a larger share of the crops at harvest. His tasks included supervising others' work as well as evaluating them with work-points. He had to represent the interests of his village at the township council, announce new regulations, as well as solve interpersonal conflicts.⁶³⁷

Many of my informants stressed that in the first years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, it was still illegal to practice Buddhism in Kham – in the provincial areas of the PRC, liberalization processes took longer. However, around the year 1980, a tradesman from an influential 'Jo mda' clan told the energetic young Kha cham *dpon po* about a peculiar lama who had been living in his stable for several years. He never had to wear more than one robe and hardly ate anything at all. Local people talked about his unusual gift of taming wild animals. The extraordinary yogin was none other than the *Mahāsiddha* Karma nor bu bzang po

person as far as Tshul khirms mthar phyin's life is concerned. Unfortunately, I have not been able to interview Shes rab nyi ma.

⁶³¹ Unfortunately, I was not able to find out whether this is a birth name or the name he received upon ordination.

⁶³² Orthography of Kha cham is uncertain.

⁶³³ gNas mdo khra 'od bde chen gling founded by the illustrious hermit and scholar Karma Chag med (1613-1678) which forms a sub-branch of the Karma pa school.

⁶³⁴ See map in Appendix.

⁶³⁵ The age of my informants will be given according to the Western calculation.

⁶³⁶ The fact that Tshul khirms mthar phyin had a wife and children was shielded from me intentionally by several informants, including two of Tshul khirms mthar phyin's family members, who are both living at La phyi as monk and nun. They refused to admit this on numerous occasions. I discovered the misinformation by chance during my second visit to the hermitage in 2008, when one of the children learning the alphabet at the meditation school came to my hut and casually chatted about "the master's son," etc. When I later confronted several La phyi nuns, they felt the topic was awkward and should best be avoided. Only then did I realize how fervently many La phyi hermits believe in celibacy as an important vehicle for ritual power. Compare Germano (1998: 69-70) for the story of mKhan po 'Jigs phun who renounced having a consort even though he was a *gter ston*. What is also true is that associating a monk or nun with the topic of sex and progeny can be perceived as polluting and offensive even if it concerns their past; i.e. their life before they took celibacy vows. Moreover, this case is an example of the fact that the agents of the hermitic revival at La phyi are ready to consciously tamper with the past in order to create their version of an ideal life story of a modern saint.

⁶³⁷ Compare other modern saints, who had also been cadres like the last Panchen Lama or 12th bSam lding rDo rje phag mo. See Diemberger 2007.

(1906/7-1984), also known as “The Second Mi la ras pa.”⁶³⁸ He had agreed with the 16th Karma pa to stay in Tibet and take care of the bKa’ brgyud transmission, especially of the recognition of reincarnates in the face of the destruction of the teachings.

Tshul khrim mthar phyin was determined to meet the unusual lama, who was around 75 years old at that point. For the sake of security, their first encounter took place at night. When Tshul khrim mthar phyin, who was 33 years old, saw his teacher for the first time, he felt “as if he actually met the Buddha in person.”⁶³⁹ Having returned home, he first began applying the instructions he received in secrecy. When religious practice in Kham officially became legal and acceptable again, he performed one hundred *bsnyung gnas* (fasting rituals) in a cave behind the mountain situated opposite his family home. In the meantime, he was also asked to manage the affairs of the nearby gNas mdo and sKyo brag monasteries of the Karma and ‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud schools. His duties included organizing wood and provisions. He would also embark on long journeys to sDe dge in order to buy books for the monasteries at the famous printing press; he once even went there on foot.

From the moment Tshul khrim mthar phyin met Karma nor bu, he traveled to ‘Jo mda’ on a regular basis to receive teachings directly from the great *siddha*. He would sometimes take his mother to accompany him on the month-long journey. On the consecutive trips, Tshul khrim mthar phyin was granted the transmissions of Mahāmudrā and the Six Yogas of Nāropa.⁶⁴⁰

These visits gradually left him changed for good. An unyielding conviction grew in him and in 1988, four years after the passing of his guru, Tshul khrim mthar phyin made up his mind to leave ordinary life behind. Following the footsteps of his lama, he became a renunciate yogin, resolved to meditate in solitude regardless of the hardships.

His plan was to take ordination, and he suggested that his wife and six children all accompany him in his new life as meditators. Today, bSod nams dbyangs ‘dzom thinks “her *karma* was not good enough” to have accepted her husband’s proposal. Back then, she felt that the children were too young (the youngest one was still a toddler) for her to take on an ascetic lifestyle in remote surroundings, so she decided that herself and the family would stay in Kha cham. She did not mind that her determined spouse would become a monk and an ascetic, her only preference was for Tshul khrim mthar phyin to settle down somewhere not too far from Kha cham.

Tshul khrim mthar phyin was already 41 years old at the time he made up his mind to become a yogin – approximately the age when Mi la ras pa himself began practicing meditation in austere conditions. He had been learning with Karma nor bu for eight years as a layman, however, as he said in 2008, “if you really want to practice, you have to renounce all comfort.”⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁸ For the life story, see subchapter below.

⁶³⁹ In his own words.

⁶⁴⁰ Compare this with the information supplied by Karma nor bu’s biographer and disciple Karma stobs rgyal (1999: 71) who only gives the number of nine students, who were direct recipients of the Six Yogas; gSal byed is among them, but Tshul khrim mthar phyin is not.

⁶⁴¹ With the decision to leave the mundane world, Tshul khrim mthar phyin would not only emulate the life story of his guru and earlier lineage fathers, but also come closer to the blueprint set forth in Tibetan biography,

After his ordination, Tshul khriims mthar phyin joined one of the most prominent disciples of the *Mahāsiddha* as well as the sKyo brag abbot and simultaneously, the highest authority of the monastic community, gSal byed rin po che (b.1955), also known as the sKyo brag gSal dga', for a pilgrimage to Central Tibet. The relationship that the two meditators developed at this time would become very important for Tshul khriims mthar phyin's spiritual career, recognition and activity. For all his monastic duties, gSal dga' was Tshul khriims mthar phyin's more *clerical* counterpart, whose privileges made it possible for Tshul khriims mthar phyin to develop into a meditation master famous throughout Khams and beyond and to found the meditation school of La phyi.

gSal dga' and Tshul khriims mthar phyin visited Lha sa and meditated at the sites important for the history of the bKa' brgyud lineages and Buddhism in Tibet. After the two-year-long pilgrimage, gSal dga' had to return home to resume his duties at his monastery. As for Tshul khriims mthar phyin, he was now ready to start the three-year retreat at Dwags lha monastery, the main seat of sGam po pa in today's TAR.⁶⁴²

As gSal dga' returned home, he informed Tshul khriims mthar phyin's family of the latter's decision and asked for their approval. bSod nams dbyangs 'dzom admits she would have been more enthusiastic if the father of her children had chosen a place less distant than the Dwags lha monastery in Central Tibet. Somehow, with the help of relatives and other villagers, she managed the housework; the children were all well. She also managed to support her former spouse in retreat by sending provisions from time to time.

The youngest son was an unruly boy, always getting into fights. This mischievous child, named Tshul khriims bdud 'dul (b.1975) later grew up to become one of his father's closest disciples. When we met him in 2007, he was thirty-three years old and had already spent twelve years in retreat: six years at gNas mdo, three years at the sKyo brag-affiliated Khang ne, and three years at the side of his father, in the caves of Chab sti brag. For a year or so, during his father's closed retreat phase, he was La phyi's main meditation master.⁶⁴³ He supervised the practice of the community and at the newly built, miniature *lha khang*, and held teachings open also to lay people of the area.

When I visited La phyi in 2008, the young lama was not present. Following the wish of gSal dga' Rin po che as one of the highest 'Ba' rom pa authorities, he had gone to the "meditation encampment" of Ya chen in the distant gSe rta region to absorb the teachings of the Great Perfection from one of today's most respected masters of the rNying ma school, A khyug Lung rtogs rgyal mtshan (b.1927).⁶⁴⁴

In 1993, when Tshul khriims mthar phyin's three-year retreat was over, he was determined to start the life of a wandering yogin. gSal dga' Rin po che suggested that he should come to the mountain of Chab sti brag in sKyo brag area, where according to local tradition, many 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud masters had meditated in

where people in their forties and fifties prepare for death and rebirth by increasing their efforts in the field of religious practice. See Huber 2002 b: 143.

⁶⁴² Situated in rGya tsha county in the Lho kha area. This is the place where 'Ba' rom Dar ma dbang phyug received instructions from sGam po pa. The program in this retreat is most probably 'Ba' rom pa since it had been revived by the sKyo brag gSal byed.

⁶⁴³ That means Tshul khriims mthar phyin did not travel, did not receive visitors nor did he ever leave his cave, devoting himself entirely to the practice of meditation.

⁶⁴⁴ For more on Ya chen and its connection with La phyi: see below.

caves and performed miracles. The Chab sti *gnas* is also an extension of sKyo brag Seng ge rdzong, one of the twenty-five *gnas* in Khams associated with Padmasambhava and revealed by mChog gling.

In keeping with the biographical tradition of both his guru and Mi la ras pa himself, for six years Tshul khriims mthar phyin led a hidden, ascetic existence at the mountains of Chab sti brag. He wandered from cave to cave, living on alpine plants and cold spring water, and applying a yogic method of extracting “life-essence” from minerals (*bcud len*).⁶⁴⁵ He recounts that at times, *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* would manifest to provide him with food.”⁶⁴⁶ For a certain period, he lived entirely in the open, on a boulder top, unshielded from the elements.⁶⁴⁷ At this spot, his disciples later built a tiny meditation cabin, one of the few he currently uses.

Around this time gSal dga’ presented Tshul khriims mthar phyin with a white cotton robe as a sign of his proficiency in the *gtum mo* yoga. Thus, Tshul khriims mthar phyin received the same honors as his guru, Karma nor bu bzang po, “The Second Mi la ras pa” (*Mi la gnyis pa*), by becoming a *ras pa*, “wearer of cotton.” Later he would also be known as “The Third Mi la ras pa.” Similarly to this great master, he had a late start into religious life, but through his complete dedication to the discipline of renunciation and ascetic life in the mountains, he was able to reach liberation “in that very body and life.”

Soon word spread about the yogin living in the mountains above sKyo brag. People started looking for him in order to receive his blessing, advice, and increasingly often – meditation instructions. Tshul khriims mthar phyin wished to find a new, quieter place, but after all, sKyo brag gSal dga’ had asked him to remain at Chab brag forever.

Around 1999, the *ras pa* began his career as meditation instructor (*sgrub dpon*) in the many retreat centers rebuilt in association with sKyo brag. He also instructed the practitioners in sealed retreat (*bcad rgya*) at the nearby Khang ne monastery. Notably, his skill in the Six Yogas was recognized beyond the locality and beyond his school, when a non-sectarian teacher and yogin Chos dbyings rdo rje, connected with the Sa skya monastery of Thub bstan dar rgyas gling in the greater sKye dgu mdo area invited him to teach at his retreat center of bKra shis sgrub chung gling for two months.⁶⁴⁸

When he first received the white cotton robe from gSal dga’ in honor of his *gtum mo* skill, he changed back into his old red robes on the rare occasion when he went down to the village to join the monastic rituals; he did not want to draw too much

⁶⁴⁵ *bcud len* is one of the *thun mong gi dngos grub* (“mundane *siddhis*”), traditionally applied by yogins who dwell in remote mountain areas. See Lama Thubten Yeshe (n.d.), “Taking the Essence,” at <http://www.lamayeshe.com/index.php?sect=article&id=47> (accessed 24.10.2010).

⁶⁴⁶ According to his own words; this was one of the very few special experiences or abilities he ever admitted having.

⁶⁴⁷ Compare Ray (2002: 429): “Sometimes, meditators took vows to live out of doors for periods of time, practicing in the open in high fields, on the flanks of hills, or on mountaintops and, like the great nineteenth-century Ri-me master Pahl-di Rinpoche, sleeping in ditches or hollows at night.”

⁶⁴⁸ This lama is known to have many Han disciples and is also a “self-made-man.” Much like Tshul khriims mthar phyin, he had started out as an ordinary monk with no title. In the course of his versatile training in Lam ’bras, Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen and the many years in retreat, he gained realization, was officially recognized as a *sprul sku* and great master by the abbot of the associated Wa ra monastery in ’Jo mda’ rdzong in Chab mdo prefecture. Thub bstan dar rgyas gling is located in the Yu shu TAP, 1.5 hours by car out of sKye dgu mdo town, in the sGa area. For the history of this institution, see D.P. Jackson 2003: 526, 529.

attention to himself as the only one dressed in white. However, he explains that in the end, he discarded the red robe in order to stay true to his poverty vow, which allows him to own only one piece of clothing. Since that time, he has often been photographed in the style of *Mi la ras pa*: wearing his white robe and red meditation belt (*sgom thag*), sitting cross-legged at his cave, often with his right hand cupped at his right ear.⁶⁴⁹

When explaining the meaning of the white robe, Tshul khrims mthar phyin re-invokes the tradition of the first two-fold Tibetan *sangha* (*dge 'dun gyi sde gnyis*), which was divided into monks wearing red (*'dul ba'i sde*) and *mantrikas* wearing white (*sngags kyi sde*). He also emphasized the bKa' brgyud pa lore of the great cotton-clad practitioners, including his own guru in the recent times, as well as the custom of the Inner Heat demonstration performed by *sgrub khang* graduates. Tshul khrims mthar phyin asserts that the *gtum mo* accomplishment shields them from cold, hunger, thirst and unhappiness, and that the white robe also marks a seasoned practitioner of meditation.

In 2002 Tshul khrims mthar phyin went for pilgrimage to Ri bo rTse lnga (Chin. Wutanshan) in China proper, making the journey together with a promising young student, who had already displayed the signs of proficiency in the Inner Heat practice and also received the privilege of wearing a white robe.⁶⁵⁰ Both yogins visited the Ya chen complex,⁶⁵¹ where they stayed for one month. They also stopped at gSer rta bla rung.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's fame as a meditation master grew and increasingly more people came to see him on a regular basis; he also traveled to monasteries, towns and villages in Yushu TAP and beyond, where he gave empowerments (*dbang*) or teachings.⁶⁵² On his consecutive visits to the hermitages of the sKyo brag area, Tshul khrims mthar phyin reports having noticed that there were not

⁶⁴⁹ Many shops in sKye dgu mdo as well as other towns and villages of the former Nang chen kingdom sell Tshul khrims mthar phyin's photos and "photographic *thang kas*," i.e. computer-processed photographs styled as a traditional *thang ka* painting, sewn in brocade and stretched between two wooden batons so that they can be reeled into a roll. The most popular of these images always show him posed as *Mi la ras pa* and in the context of the *ras pa* practice style exemplified by his teacher. One of such photographs depicts him in the posture characteristic of *Mi la ras pa* (relaxed position of legs, body bent over to the side and his right hand cupped at his right ear to listen to the prophetic voices of the *daḳīnīs*). Another "photographic *thang ka*" shows his image from the younger years, in his single white robe and a red meditation belt (*sgom thag*) wrapped around his shoulder and knee. Above his head, in the manner of lineage presentations, on the left hand-side, there is a miniature painting of *Mi la ras pa*, also wearing a white robe and red meditation belt. On the top right, there is a digital cutout of another photograph, depicting Karma nor bu in his white robe and meditation belt. While the perception of Tshul khrims mthar phyin as an embodiment of *Mi la ras pa* will be discussed extensively throughout this thesis, the images as instances of modern ritual imagery seem to follow a certain topos in the presentation of high bKa' brgyud pa lamas in the style of *Mi la ras pa*. Thus, pre-modern photographs of the 16th Karma pa Rig pa'i rdo rje or Kalu Rinpoche portrayed these lamas in the *Mi la ras pa* costume and position.

⁶⁵⁰ The holy site of Wutanshan had served as an important pilgrimage spot for centuries already. It also alludes to the Ris med movement and the rDzogs chen lore as a mythical abode of Vimalamitra. See: Tuttle 2007.

⁶⁵¹ Ya chen enjoys a special connection to La phyi, which will be discussed below.

⁶⁵² At Tshul khrims mthar phyin's former household that I visited in late 2008, now inhabited by his wife and other relatives, I saw his photograph during an empowerment ceremony, while he was wearing the famous Ti shri ras pa hat, reserved only for those authorized to instruct others in the precepts of the 'Ba' rom school (the hat is discussed above in the history of the 'Ba' rom).

enough offers to accommodate the growing demand for religious institutions for women, so he decided to found a retreat center especially for nuns.⁶⁵³

This is how in 2005, at the foot of the Chab sti brag dkar mountain, the meditation school of La phyi came into existence. In 2008, the center housed a constantly fluctuating number of up to 150 nuns from the immediate vicinity and other areas, two of which were Tshul khirms mthar phyin's own daughters and his elder sister. There were also male monastics: the administrator, the four monks enclosed in the upper *sgrub khang*, plus the visits from Ya chen instructors. Tshul khirms mthar phyin's younger brother had settled at the hermitage in 2007 and took the *dge tshul* vows from gSal dga' Rin po che a year later in early autumn. Some of the master's lay family members are also living here: one older sister as well as the old mother.

The *ras pa* still takes care of his remaining relatives. In 2002 he personally visited his family in Kha cham after his son-in-law had died in a car accident. Once, while on his way from ceremonies he performed for the public in rDza stod region, Tshul khirms mthar phyin also paid a visit to a hospital in sKye dgu mdo, where he did a 'khru ritual for the fast recovery of his former wife.⁶⁵⁴

Tshul khirms mthar phyin is credited with possessing many supernatural powers. There is talk of several hand- and footprints he was supposed to have left in stone, one of which was confirmed by both Tshul khirms mthar phyin himself and by the retreat attendant (*sgrub g.yog*) for the upper *sgrub khang*. There is a very distinct trace of a human hand on the face of a cliff on the right side of the enclosure on Level I of the La phyi complex. He is said to have left the handprint in 2006.⁶⁵⁵

The retreat attendant reports that the master was walking past the stone wall one day. "The rock is so soft today" he said in the company of several people, while placing his hand on the surface of the boulder. "At first nothing happened, but over the course of a few days, a clear image of a human hand began to emerge."⁶⁵⁶

Local people also believe Tshul khirms mthar phyin has the ability to fly like Mi la ras pa and the 'Ba' rom patriarchs, though the master denies possessing this power. But most of all, nearly every interviewer and Tshul khirms mthar phyin himself stressed his skill to stay warm in a single, thin cotton robe even in the midst of the coldest of winters; they speak of his ability to melt snow with his body heat and to do without food, even if he has again resumed eating "human food." Some interviewers also talk about his clairvoyance.

Tshul khirms mthar phyin has many lay disciples and donors as well, some from as far as Hong Kong, others in sKye dgu town. In fact, the sKye dgu mdo disciple confirms that Tshul khirms mthar phyin was invited to such remote regions of the PRC as Shanghai, as well as to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even Japan, but he never accepted any of the requests.

⁶⁵³ The expression "nun" denotes a female celibate practitioner signified by her shorn hair and red robes. In the Tibetan tradition, this corresponds to the taking of *dge mtshul ma* vows, since the higher vows of *dge longs ma* (*bhikṣuṇī*) never took solid ground in Tibet. The local designation for "nun" in sKyo brag and other Nang chen dialects is *dge ma*, rather than *a ne/a ni* as in sDe dge.

⁶⁵⁴ This involves ritual implements such as a mirror (*me long*). The sick person's image is reflected in the mirror and the performing lama pours water over the mirror's surface into a special basin. This is done to purify the karmic defilements which caused the disease.

⁶⁵⁵ For the levels of the hermitage, see the sections on topography below.

⁶⁵⁶ Compare Huber 2006: 8.

An Internet page by an exiled sKyo brag lama, Sonam Tenzin, currently based in Australia, extols the history and special qualities of sKyo brag monastery and features Tshul khrims mthar phyin sitting in a cave with his Mi la ras pa attire on; he is described as one of the two “local saints.”⁶⁵⁷

gSal dga’ continues to support Tshul khrims mthar phyin by sending disciples, financing Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s students in retreat, helping with road construction, and most of all – by endorsing Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s position as important local lama. Another reincarnate from sKyo brag’s affiliate, Khang ne dgon, A bstan Phun tshogs (b.1970), is a close disciple of Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s. Currently, he also promotes Tshul khrims mthar phyin through regular invitations to instruct the Khang ne monks, especially those in retreat. The support of the *clerical* authorities is vital for the reputation which Tshul khrims mthar phyin enjoys as an important meditation teacher and local saint. A photograph widespread throughout the Yushu TAP shows the three masters as a well-known sKyo brag trinity.⁶⁵⁸

Occasionally, he still enters closed retreat. These periods are closed for visitors, except for his personal disciples, usually meditation adepts, whom he instructs even while in closed retreat.⁶⁵⁹ During this time, Tshul khrims mthar phyin stays in one of his caves. In 2007, when I first arrived at his meditation school, he was in such closed retreat, but an exception was made for my two travel companions and me to see him.⁶⁶⁰ There was one condition put forward by the masters son, Tshul khrims bdud ’dul, that each of us promise to repeat the short Vajrasattva mantra 100,000 times afterwards. We were also instructed not to ask any “worldly” questions such as inquires about his personal life story, since he was “beyond that.” Since no other questions came to our minds, we just sat there observing him.

He sat resting in meditation, silent and immovable, his eyes fixed on the horizon, his one hand busy with the beads of his *mālā*. It was a very cold November day in high altitude, so we were struck at the sight of the yogin, who appeared relaxed in his single, thin cotton robe. After what seemed like a long time, but could have been a quarter of an hour, we went down from his cave to the hermitage and departed the next day.

In 2008, on our next arrival to the retreat center, which had grown so much within a year that we hardly recognized it, Tshul khrims mthar phyin was not present – he had gone to perform rituals for local people. It was not until the next day that the lama arrived. Triumphant and enthusiastically, he recognized us from the previous year’s visit to La phyi. He gave us a blessing by placing his hand on our heads, sat on the grassy meadow and stated: “We will have plenty of time to talk.”

This was quite astonishing. The mute and immovable saint, who had avoided making eye contact and would not even accept a *kha btags* we remembered from the previous year, was now behaving in a direct manner. Of course, he had previously been in retreat and as we arrived, he was immersed in deep meditation.

We then discovered that earlier that year Tshul khrims mthar phyin had been requested by the sKyo brag gSal dga’ to enter an activity phase (*phrin las ’jug*

⁶⁵⁷ See “Chodrak Monastery” at <http://www.baromkagyü.org/pageBK3.html> (accessed 01.02.2010).

⁶⁵⁸ Although historically, the trinity (*sKyo brag bla sprul rnam gsum*) is made up of three main reincarnates: gSal byed, A bstan phun tshogs and Dung dkar.

⁶⁵⁹ For a master in strict retreat and still giving teachings, compare Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008: 226.

⁶⁶⁰ For additional information, see Introduction to this chapter.

pa).⁶⁶¹ This mostly entailed the supervision of construction projects at his hermitage: temples, new huts, roads and the three-year retreat enclaves. That year, Tshul khirms mthar phyin furthermore traveled throughout the towns and villages of the area to give public teachings and bless new retreat sites.

Although he is an acclaimed local master, his behavior is indeed very informal and direct. Perhaps due to his long career as a layman, family man and village cadre, he likes to joke and tease his students and does not require ceremonial behavior in his presence. He assisted in building some of the retreat huts at La phyi and is keen on discussing construction details with the workers. Apart from his favorite tiny cave where he gives instructions, his second official “audience room” is the grimy kitchen of a temple building, where he sits in a decrepit meditation box (*sgom khri*).

At the occasion of our second stay in the hermitage, Tshul khirms mthar phyin was determined to give us teachings. Especially for me, he envisioned a future as a meditator at La phyi. He insisted on the value of yogic training, as opposed to intellectual objectives, and dismissed my academic objective as “childish” and a waste of time. He demanded that I learn the Six Yogas and the Mahāmudrā from him, at best in three-year retreat.⁶⁶²

Tshul khirms mthar phyin was planning to enter closed, life-long retreat in autumn 2009, but my sources in the field confirmed that in 2009 and 2010 he was still travelling as well as receiving visits of close disciples.

VIII.1.1. Karma nor bu bzang po: “The Second Mi la ras pa”

Tshul khirms mthar phyin’s root guru, the *Mahāsiddha* (*grub chen*) Karma nor bu bzang po (1906/7-1984) from whom he received both the Mahāmudrā transmission and the Six Yogas of Nāro pa, was one of Khams’ most exceptional yogins attributed with the name of “The Second Mi la ras pa.” His spiritual legacy at sKyo brag precedes the fame of Tshul khirms mthar phyin, since also gSal byed Rin po che, A bstan phun tshogs and the *bshad grwa* instructor dPa’ brtan (b.1969) were his disciples.⁶⁶³

Moreover, it seems that the person of Karma nor bu is crucial for the continuation of yogic practice in Khams today. Wherever I went, the most accomplished lamas and meditators – and not only those associated with the bKa’ brgyud schools – claimed some kind of spiritual descent from this renowned teacher who had received profound non-sectarian training from several Ris med masters. Tshul khirms mthar phyin explains that from the 1980s, at the onset of the post-Mao revival in Qinghai, until Karma nor bu’s death in 1984, practitioners of all schools and lineages sought after him for instructions, which he bestowed according to the

⁶⁶¹ The balance between meditation (*sgom*) and activity (*spyod*) is a traditional topic in the biographies of masters and in practice manuals. see: Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008, 36-37 and dBang phyug rdo rje, et al. 1978: 101.

⁶⁶² In fact, the many interactions I had with Tshul khirms mthar phyin are a very entertaining and intriguing subject in itself, so perhaps they should also be committed to writing elsewhere.

⁶⁶³ For the impact of Kar nor on gSal byed see section on gSal byed’s life in this work.

individuals' needs and their background: "he taught Lam 'bras to the Sa skya pas, Mahāmudrā to the bKa' brgyud pas and rDzogs chen to the rNying ma pas."⁶⁶⁴

Since Karma nor bu owed his position of authority solely to his meditation skills rather than to being recognized as a reincarnate, he exemplified the Ris med "self-made" saint model. Today, Karma nor bu's influence has become global since several exiled lamas mention him on their Internet sites as their guru.⁶⁶⁵

The following biography was compiled from several written sources and the various oral accounts I have collected.⁶⁶⁶

Karma gzhan phan chos kyi rgya mtsho, otherwise known as Karma nor bu bzang po (*alias* Grub chen Kar nor) and famed as "The Second Mi la ras pa" (*Mi la gnyis pa*) was born in the year of the Male Fire Horse (1906/7) at the sacred site of Padma'i rag ljongs in the bone-line of mGar chung as one of five siblings. Meditation training was in his family history: one of his brothers and his paternal uncle had performed one or more three-year retreats at dPal pungs monastery. Thus, the young man received the Refuge name of Karma nor bu bzang po from the dPal spungs reincarnate lama dBon rgan (dates unknown).

At the age of 18, he obtained ordination from Be ru mKhyen brtse (1895 – 1945) at Skyabs *dgon* and was given the name of Karma gzhan phan chos kyi rgya mtsho.⁶⁶⁷

His root guru was the Zur mang bKa' brgyud pa lama Drung pa 10th.⁶⁶⁸ He also had many other famous teachers, which illustrated Kar nor's Ris med orientation: first and foremost, the 16th Karma pa, the 2nd Kong sprul, rDzong gsar mKhyen brtse chos kyi blo gros and the great non-sectarian scholar mKhan po gZhan dga'.

⁶⁶⁴ The same formulation also in the anonymous compilation *Grub pa'i dbang phyug karma gzhan phan chos kyi rgya mtsho'i rnam thar* (n.d.).

⁶⁶⁵ The disciples of Karma nor bu, who also mention him on the World Wide Web are: Bagyod (=Bag yod) at <http://www.geocities.com/tdspj/bio/bagyud.html> (accessed 24.06.2009), Thubten Nyima (=Thub bstan nyi ma) at <http://www.thubtennima.net/KarmaNorbu.html> (accessed 20.01.2011), Karma Senge (=Karma Sen ge) at <http://nalandatranslation.org/projects/articles/karma-senge-rinpoche-on-kyere-monastery-and-trungpa-rinpoche/> (accessed 20.01.2011), Lama Gape (=Bla ma dga' pad) <http://www.rigdzin.com/lamagape.html> (accessed 20.01.2011), Khenpo Tashi Gyaltsen (=mKhan po bkra shis rgyal mtshan) <http://www.kagyu.org/kagyulineage/teachers/tea26.php> (accessed 20.11.2011). The international organization started by Drung pa 11th in the West reports that a disciple of Karma nor bu's was hired as main tutor to the new Drung pa 12th at Zur mang in 2003: "Chokyi Senge, Trungpa XII Rinpoche" at <http://www.konchok.org/trungpa.html> (accessed 12.03.2008).

⁶⁶⁶ The main sources for Karma nor bu's biography are: 1) Karma stobs rgyal 1999 2) Karma bā la ra dza (n.d.) 3) *Grub pa'i dbang phyug karma gzhan phan chos kyi rgya mtsho'i rnam thar* (n.d.), which is an anonymous compilation that also lacks proper pagination. Sources 1) and 2) are basically identical, except that 1) was published in book format and 2) in *dpe cha* format. I assume they were authored by the same individual, since the name of author in 1) is the Sanskrit equivalent of 2).

⁶⁶⁷ Be ru mkhyen brtse of dPal spungs was a speech emanation of mKhyen brtse dbang po.

⁶⁶⁸ Trungpa Tulku (=Drung pa sprul sku 1939-1987) reports in his autobiography (Trungpa 2000: 66) how Kong sprul instructed the 10th Drung pa: "You must establish five meditation centers, the first in your own monastery and the other four in neighboring ones. This will be a beginning, in this way your teaching will not be confined to your own monks, but you will be able to spread it more widely." After this was accomplished, the same source claims that the hermitages "continued to flourish until the Communists took possession of Tibet" (Trungpa 2000: 66).

At 22, he went to the Wer phug at rDo rje khyung rdzong, which was a Zur mang hermitage.⁶⁶⁹ There, from the Drung pa himself, he received the oral explanation of the Six Yogas, which he practiced in retreat for four years. Although from then on he stayed in retreat in different places throughout most of his life, it was at Wer phug that he experienced most of his breakthrough visions and attainments. At that time, Zur mang itself, as well as the entire rDo rje khyung rdzong retreat complex above the monastery, including the Wer phug cave, provided the scene for dynamic Ris med activity.⁶⁷⁰

By 27, as Tshul khriims mthar phyin put it, Karma nor bu “accomplished everything and his realization dawned like the sun over the mountains.”

From the time when he started his training in the Six Yogas, he began his ascetic conduct, which he continued throughout his life. Even when he reached a high level of realization, he never wore anything more than a single white cotton robe for the next fifty-six years; daytime or nighttime, he would always remain seated in the cross-legged posture of a meditator, or else he would squat. In the course of this lifestyle, he developed a serious illness, but even this hardship did not make him change the habit of never lying down at all.⁶⁷¹

At dPal spungs he received the *Thugs rje chen po ngan song rang grol* cycle and Four-Armed Mahākāla in the tradition of Karma Pak shi from the 16th Karma pa. From Si tu Pad ma dbang mchog rgyal po he obtained the mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul bKa’ ’bum, gDams ngag mdzod, bKa’ brgyud sngags mdzod, *Shes bya kun khyab*, *Sa skya sgrub thab kun bstus*, gNam chos, etc. From Kar sras Kong sprul he received the *Rin chen gter mdzod*.

On the occasion of *Rin chen gter mdzod* transmission, his “vajra-siblings” became great lamas such as gNas nang dPa’ bo, Khra leg sKyabs mgon and the lama who later became known in the West as Kalu Rinpoche; Kar nor was able to exchange many teachings with them.

Around this time, he received the *mChog gling gter gsar* and the *Nine Yānas* empowerment from the 16th Karma pa. He also studied and practiced numerous rDzogs chen teachings, as well as the complete works of ’Ju Mi pham.

He was an heir to the Ris med movement, not only by education, but also by later activity: all of the many of his disciples I have spoken with and all of his biographies repeatedly emphasized the versatility of his training and the ability to approach each disciple with the instruction suitable to his/her background, just as Tshul khriims mthar phyin stated above.⁶⁷²

However, he was mostly dedicated to transmitting the Karma bKa’ brgyud Six Yogas and Mahāmudrā. He was a meditation instructor of independent disciples

⁶⁶⁹ Zur mang takes great pride in their retreat places that are especially fitting for *gtum mo* practice. See a text by Kar nor’s contemporary, a student of mKhan po gZhan dga’ and of the 15th Karmapa, mKhan chen Padma nram rgyal (n.d.).

⁶⁷⁰ See Rab gsal zla ba, et al. (2008: 121-122 and 131) for a report on a major exchange of Sa skya and rNying ma empowerments at this prominent bKa’ brgyud pa center. Kong sprul was of an opinion that one of the places on mChog gling’s narrative map was a mountain behind one of the Zur mang retreat centers. See Gardner 2007: 214.

⁶⁷¹ Karma stobs rgyal 1999: 29.

⁶⁷² It is also interesting to note that his realization has been described with the use of both Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen terminology. See *Grub pa’i dbang phyug karma gzhan phan chos kyi rgya mtsho’i rnam thar*.

and also taught at several *sgrub khangs*, some of which he established himself.⁶⁷³ However, it is said that only the most “extraordinary” (*thun mong min pa*) of his pupils received the Six Yogas. His “heart-sons” (*thugs sras*), i.e. closest and finest disciples, included sKyo brag gSal dga’, lama Karma stobs rgyal and Go ’jo rgyal msthan.⁶⁷⁴

The offensive of the People’s Liberation Army and their march through Khams in 1950 found him at Zur mang in retreat. The monastery was severely damaged. All meditators were of the same opinion: if they don’t escape, they will be in danger. But Kar nor had a vision of the Four-Armed Mahākāla in a form of a small boy, who pleaded with them not to break their retreat. Thus, they stayed, and miraculously, in spite of the severe fighting in the area, they did not come to harm.⁶⁷⁵

There are numerous other wonders attributed to him. He is said to have possessed the ability to fly like Mi la ras pa, melt snow in extremely cold temperatures, leave handprints and footprints in solid rock, communicate with and receive auspicious gifts from non-human beings or to transform alcohol to win a debate with a jealous scholar – much in the fashion of Mi la ras pa. Tshul khriims mthar phyin says Kar nor mastered the swift-feet *siddhi* (*rkang mgvogs kyi dngos grub*), and when he was on pilgrimage in the Lha sa area, the journey from mTshur phu to dGa’ ldan took him merely two hours.

Moreover, in the manner of Mi la ras pa, he authored special songs that transmitted his mystic experiences (*nyams mgur*). During his prolonged periods of meditation in remote places, he was supported by *vīras* and *ḍākinīs*. He often nourished himself using the *bcud len* yoga.

Karma nor bu enjoyed an exceptionally close bond with the 16th Karma pa, the authority who recognized him as an exceptional *gtum mo* practitioner, equal to Mi la ras pa himself, and ceremonially presented him with the white robe. Karma pa was said to have valued him highly and regarded him as his role model for yogic training. Karma nor bu’s biography recounts:

Even the great 16th rGyal dbang [Karma pa] was amazed at [Karma nor bu’s] accomplishment of [the yoga] of energy channels and winds (rtsa rlung), which [kept him] warm in the icy winter wind by means of a single cotton cloth, and so he [also] wore [a white] robe. He [once] held that cotton garment in [his] hand and said: “It is the same as the robes of a yogin who has accomplished [complete control over] energy channels and winds.”⁶⁷⁶

This appreciation of his Tantric prowess, which came from one of the most respected lamas in the Tibetan world, was significant for his yogic career. While

⁶⁷³ For instance at his native lJongs; also at mTshur phu in Central Tibet.

⁶⁷⁴ Karma stobs rgyal rin po che alias Karma bā la ra dza is also Kar nor’s biographer. He currently resides in Lha sa.

⁶⁷⁵ This passage stems from Karma stobs rgyal (1999: 35). Its timing can only be assumed, but with considerable probability, it relates to 1950. Moreover, other data on this period of Nang chen’s history confirms that the PLA did not simply cross the realm to reach Chab mdo in Tibet, but that there was struggle at least at sKyo brag and Zur mang, the two most important political and religious centers in northern Nang chen that lie on each side of the sKye dgu mdo-Ri bo che tract leading to Chab mdo.

⁶⁷⁶ *rgyal dbang bcu drug pa chen po’ang/ dgun gyi grang lhag la ras rkyang gis dro ba’i rtsa rlung grub pa la ngo mtshar skyes te na bza’ zbig gsol nas/ ras gos de phyag tu bsngams te rtsa rlung grub pa’i rnal ’byor pa’i na bza’ ’di ’dra red gsungs nas [...]* (Karma stobs rgyal 1999: 37).

presenting a disciple with a set of religious robes is considered a standard auspicious gift, publicly presenting them with a white robe is a ritual performance to honor their accomplishment in *gtum mo* practice and to establish them as a religious authority.

When in 1954 the Karma pa followed the Dalai Lama to Beijing for negotiations with Chairman Mao, Karma nor bu was left in charge of the main seat of the Karma pa's in Central Tibet, 'Og min mTshur phu. He was appointed to act as regent-abbot (*rgyal tshab*) and meditation instructor, though his yogic inclination made him neglect the administrative tasks at the monastery and devote most of his energy to meditation.

Before February 1959, when the Karma pa was going into exile, he asked Kar nor to stay in Khams and to continue his activity as much as possible. Obviously, times were changing rapidly and instead of peaceful practice and teaching he had been used to, Grub chen Karma nor bu was forced to go into hiding. He spent some time in a stable among animals, but mostly he lived in different caves or holes in the ground, alone and owning nothing but his single robe and a begging bowl.⁶⁷⁷

Between 1959 and 1960, he was in retreat as usual, resting in *samādhi* and immersed in visions of historical teachers and enlightened aspects, away from the dramatic events of the Khams pa insurgency and its elimination by the PLA troops. But not for long: eventually, his retreat was discovered and he was denounced. His biographies relate how the Chinese guards who came to arrest him were appalled upon seeing him – he was so emaciated that they thought he did not look human anymore. He offered them the little of the tea he possessed and went with them.

Karma nor bu was compelled to physical labor in a commune (*kung hre*).⁶⁷⁸ There, he had the vision of White Tārā (sGrol dkar), who reminded him of her ability to alleviate suffering and promised:

*Do not forget me! There are no doubts that I have [now] removed [all] your obstacles.*⁶⁷⁹

His biographies report that after this episode, all those who had seized him before, were transformed and developed the *bodhisattva*-mind. Moreover, already in the production brigade, Karma nor bu was envisioning a future of free religious expression, as he predicted that the current site of labor would become a location for a new temple.

He managed to escape the commune and remained in hiding until 1980, with only a handful of disciples knowing of his whereabouts.

As he re-emerged again, his former training and experience, unspoiled by broken *samaya*-bonds – transgressions that were committed by several lamas especially

⁶⁷⁷ One of his main disciples from Nang chen area, Karma shes rab phun tshogs rin po che (b. 1955) who runs a *sgrub khang* and instructs in Six Yogas, has kept this bowl along with his guru's ceremonial cloak as relics. This lama graciously presented me with his copy of his teacher's life story and gave me a long interview.

⁶⁷⁸ This point in his biography was also too sensitive to admit by several of Karma nor bu's disciples I interviewed. Some of them untruthfully altered it, informing me that "Kar nor looked so miserable that the guards let him go."

⁶⁷⁹ [...] *nga rang ma brjed dang/ khyed kyi bar chad nged kyes sel bar the tshom med ces gsungs/* (Karma stobs rgyal 1999: 47).

during the Cultural Revolution – he became a much sought-after preceptor and an important guarantor of continuity of Tibetan Tantrism.

Until his death in 1984, he was constantly busy re-establishing many transmissions. He gave the great Ris med collections like the *Rin chen gter mdzod* to a crowd of one thousand people. He was especially sought after to train new adepts in the practices of the Six Yogas. He had several practice sites and meditation schools rebuilt.

He settled at a meditation school near his cave at 'Jo mda', Chab mdo prefecture in the TAR. Monks, nuns and lay people from Khams and dBus flocked to receive instructions, vows and empowerments from him.⁶⁸⁰

Grub chen Karma nor bu's death in June 1984 and his cremation were said to have been accompanied by miraculous circumstances. His reincarnation was subsequently discovered by the exiled Si tu pa 12th (b. 1954).⁶⁸¹

Kar nor's legacy in Khams lives on. I interviewed several of his students who had established their own practice centers: venues for three-year retreat, meditation schools, etc. One of them is La phyi *sgom grwa*, the object of this case study, which draws from his example in many ways.

Thus, for those who continue Kar nor's activity, his life story is a crucial statement of survival and continuity of Tantric lineages through decades of violence, suppression and enforced social and economic change. According to his disciples, "The Second Mi la ras pa" embodies the highest ideals prevalent in Tibetan societies: liberation (*thar pa*) and Tantric transformation (*'gyur ba*), and in spite of the persecution and humiliation he faced, he maintained his unrelenting dedication to meditation practice and upheld the *bodhisattva* principle and his personal connection to the Tantric deities, as exemplified in his vision of Tārā he experienced in the commune.

I have mentioned that one of the important conditions which can guarantee the continued existence of a culture is the biological survival of individuals who represent it. The case of Grub chen Karma nor bu becomes an especially lucid example thereof. After 1980, the scriptures, remnants of buildings or ritual artifacts saved from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution were not sufficient to inspire and enable religious activists to reconstruct past lineages or practices. The necessary constituent was the living example of ritual experts. The physical presence of qualified masters like Karma nor bu became essential for ensuring the uninterrupted continuation of esoteric knowledge. This is by no means surprising, given the

⁶⁸⁰ Also see Fordham & Karma Senge 2005, "Karma Senge on Kyere Monastery and Trungpa Rinpoche," at <http://naladatranslation.org/projects/articles/karma-senge-rinpoche-on-kyere-monastery-and-trungpa-rinpoche/> accessed 20.05.2012.

⁶⁸¹ In fact, the narratives of Kar nor's life would serve as a rich topic of research on their own. I regret that a more precise study of the influence of this vibrant personality exceeds the scope of the current work.

fact that the guru-disciple dynamics lie at the core of Tibetan Tantrism. The bond between guru and disciple is nourished by the transmission of living experience, where books do not suffice and the expected mind-body transformation can be induced through direct human contact. Besides, the very construction of the Tibetan terms for “lineage” (*rgyud/brgyud*) emphasizes the issues of preservation of tradition and the succession of disciples.⁶⁸²

Through Karma nor bu’s dedication to renunciate life and especially through the further demonstration of mastery over the technique of Inner Heat, historical transmissions were still evidently alive in his body; his *samayas* with gurus, disciples and deities remained intact. In the short four years from the official beginning of the revival until his passing in 1984, Karma nor bu dedicated his time to transmitting this undamaged tradition by schooling disciples of all schools and lineages. In this way, Karma nor bu contributed the entirety of his being as a Tibetan Buddhist – body, speech and mind – to the propagation of tradition. Hailed as “The Second Mi la ras pa,” he had been distinguished as the embodiment of that tradition by its authorities already before 1950s, which is why he was later naturally empowered to re-establish the broken connection with the past. For all the traumatic and shameful experiences the Tibetan religious leaders had to endure during the Maoist period, Khams pa practitioners could become reassured that their sacred connection to the past and its authorities remained unharmed.

There is one more interesting aspect of Karma nor bu’s activity, which could have unfolded in a way known from religious-historical narratives, but had to develop in an utterly changed context instead. Since Communism exhibits a strong emphasis on morality, liberation, transformation and growth, several authors have argued for the perception of this ideology as a religion.⁶⁸³ Thanks to leaders like Kar nor, who endured the Cultural Revolution, Tibetans could maintain their own, indigenous voice of liberation and transformation to oppose the communist mythology of “peaceful liberation” (Chin. *Heping jiefang*) and “socialist transformation” (Chin. *Gaizao*).⁶⁸⁴

Tibetans like Karma nor bu opposed the official state “cult” of Communism with their own religion, deeply rooted in the indigenous culture and thus independent from the forces of the state. By reproducing indigenous ritual texts implanted in the landscape, local histories, and

⁶⁸² Jaeschke (1995: 111): “*rgyud*= 1. [...] thread of tradition, i.e. continuous, uninterrupted tradition.” Also see Goldstein (2001: 270): “*rgyud*= 3. Tantra 4. Lineage, descent, line [...]”

⁶⁸³ McFarland 1998, Qin 2000, Welch 1968.

⁶⁸⁴ Compare Brugger 1981: 52 and Goldstein 2007: 22. I use the term “mythology” as explained in the writings of McFarland and Welch mentioned above; they proposed an understanding of the early Chinese Communism as a religion.

most of all, in their own bodies, early revivalists like Kar nor devoted themselves to writing their own, alternative texts to counteract the official state ideology that had suppressed and deceived them. Tantric Buddhism is a perfect tool for this type of protest, since it always served as “nomadic science,” applied against state uniformity and control.

VIII.1.1.1. *Ras pas* in the past

Ever since in the 11th century, when Mi la ras pa perfected the Inner Heat and wore only a single, white cotton robe as a sign of his mastery over the elements, there has existed a custom of a ritual indication of the *gtum mo* accomplishment of a yogin with a white robe, woven from cotton (*ras*), a privilege reserved solely for experts. Hence, the designation “*ras pa*” (or the rare female equivalent “*ras ma*”) meaning “the cotton-clad one.”⁶⁸⁵

According to sKu rgyal, the special faction of Mi la’s disciples who emulated him during his lifetime became known as “the sibling lineage of *ras pas*” (*ras pa mched brgyud*).⁶⁸⁶ As already mentioned, such was the significance of the cotton-clad yogins for the perpetration of the bKa’ brgyud that several Tibetan scholars are inclined to believe that this is what caused the name “The White Lineage” (dKar brgyud) to appear. Tshul khrims mthar phyin also emphasizes the bKa’ brgyud pa-contextualization of the white robe.⁶⁸⁷

In later times, pages of Tibetan histories, especially those of the bKa’ brgyud lineages as indicated in the example of the ’Ba’ rom school, came to abound in stories of cotton-clad masters whose Tantric power was harnessed in different ways that included political leadership and founding new religious schools. Even if they were extreme renunciates, *ras pas* achieved great reverence in society: visibly marked as objects of veneration, sources of magical intervention and finally, epitomes for both moral transformation and accomplishment in Tantric training, they fulfilled all types of demands for Buddhist teachings in Tibetan societies. Consequently, the designation “*ras pa*” has evolved from its literally neutral connotation, denoting “wearer of cotton” to a highly honorific title.

What will become apparent in the case study, as the *ras pa* practice style and ethos are being revitalized today, the traditional symbolic of power is reemerging in a new context. Using the example of Tshul khrims mthar phyin, I will argue that the white robe of the *ras pa* today stands for the power and validity of Tibetan tradition in the modern reality of Khams. I

⁶⁸⁵ See Mi la ras pa, et al. 1997.

⁶⁸⁶ sKu rgyal 1982: 11-12.

⁶⁸⁷ The phenomenon of *ras pas* is apparently not restricted to bKa’ brgyud schools. See Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008: 87, 304, n. 19, 20.

demonstrate how the simple white cotton robe of a local hermit is a potent method to awake the power concealed in traditional narratives, social roles, and in the landscape of sKyo brag in order to counteract the oppressive power of the state, its imposed historical logic, as well as its forceful colonization and abrupt modernization.

VIII.2. La phyi: the beginning

Tshul khrims mthar phyin came to Chab sti in 1991, in order to meditate by himself in the mountains at this historical *gnas*, thus emulating of the lifestyle of Mi la ras pa. He settled here, because gSal byed rin po che praised the special qualities of the power place as especially suitable for solitary retreat. The *gnas* had not been cultivated as a hermitage, so only the historical caves, like the Golden Cave could provide shelter for the yogin. As his fame grew, he took the post of the travelling retreat master (*sgrub dpon*) at sKyo brag and Khang ne—associated three-year retreat enclaves; more individual practitioners also visited him at Chab sti to ask for meditation instructions.

La phyi *sgom grwa* was established in 2005, when Tshul khrims mthar phyin was given permission from the local government, comprised of mostly Khams pa Tibetans, to start his venture at Chab sti. The hermitage was registered as an “educational project.” Then Tshul khrims mthar phyin was offered support from gSal byed rin po che and some local sponsors. With their help Tshul khrims mthar phyin was able to construct the *'du khang* as well as some of the cave-cabins at the higher levels of the hermitage.

The construction was carried out by Kha cham families linked to the first meditator-disciples of Tshul khrims mthar phyin. The *ras pa* himself helped construct some of the cabins. This feat would be unthinkable for a reincarnate, raised in the custom of exemption from all ordinary tasks, but Tshul khrims mthar phyin is a “self-made” master, much like his own guru Karma nor bu and other Ris med activists. His engagement in the menial work at La phyi (i.e. overseeing the construction and acquisition of building material for the two *sgrub khangs*) emphasized his status as “the people’s hero.”

The condensation of the human content of La phyi *sgom grwa* followed a pattern similar to the distribution of spherical waves in nature. The impetus for the local hermitic movement at La phyi – or the source of a wave, the *ras pa* Tshul khrims mthar phyin – first came to La phyi alone. After his hidden yogic period (*sbas kyi rnal 'byor*), some of his family members followed. They were his two daughters and one son; a niece; elder brother and two sisters, soon joined with their old mother. Everyone in this group accepted Tshul khrims mthar phyin

as a guru; everyone except for the mother and one sister took monastic vows and became the first meditators at La phyi.

As the wave of Tshul khrim mthar phyin's influence spread, he inspired several Kha cham villagers to settle at his hermitage for a time, including the gNas mdo monk dPal ldan chos skyong who would soon become an accomplished *ras pa* himself and the latter's aunt, a nun equally from the same gNas mdo monastic complex. Both of them had been experienced meditators and were allowed to settle immediately on the higher level.⁶⁸⁸ Another neighbor who became influential in La phyi, was 'Jigs med grags pa, the manager-monk (*gnyer pa*). He comes from Rab shis, a village close to Tshul khrim mthar phyin's native Kha cham.

Subsequently, just as waves carry energy, Tshul khrim mthar phyin's charisma radiated onwards and gradually attracted people from the vicinity of sKyo brag, then the sKye dgu mdo area, rDza stod, and even monks and nuns from the Tibetan regions of Sichuan or even Lha sa. Today, the community at La phyi encompasses practitioners and residents originating from all these phases of propagation – from Tshul khrim mthar phyin's mother to several young nuns from the central regions of the TAR, who are quickly accommodated here in spite of the dialect differences.

The meditation school of La phyi was established as training facility principally for nuns. Tshul khrim mthar phyin conceived this idea after he realized the number of his female disciples was growing disproportionately to the men; besides, before 2005, there had not been many nunneries or retreat facilities for women in the sKyo brag area. However, since the school adopted an open-door policy, it can also accommodate the needs of monks, or if need be, lay people of both genders.⁶⁸⁹

VIII.2.1. The name

Naming the meditation school at Chab sti after the favorite site of Mi la ras pa at La phyi gangs ra, where the yogin performed ascetic feats like enduring the cold and abstaining from food,⁶⁹⁰ similar to Tshul khrim mthar phyin at Chab sti, is obviously meant as a technique for legitimatization of the latter's activity, but it is also linked to the training profile of the place, focusing on producing *gtum mo* specialists, like the master Tshul khrim mthar phyin himself. On the other hand, it is also a conscious technique to revive to the past of Chab sti brag dkar *gnas* itself in order to underline the uniqueness of local tradition.

⁶⁸⁸ For the importance of topography, see below.

⁶⁸⁹ This does not mean that there are no rules for residents. For the regulations of the hermitage, see below.

⁶⁹⁰ Compare Tiso 1989: 215.

Associating the site with Mi la ras pa alludes to the figure central to the local sacred geography, that of Chos rje bSod nams bzang po, the sKyo brag *siddha* of the 14th century and at the same time, a 'Ba' rom lineage holder. I already introduced his person against the backdrop of the local legend extolling his yogic deeds, such as flying and performing miracles at The Golden Cave.

sKyo brag Chos rje is also quoted in the diaries of 'Bar ba'i rdo rje in the context of the 19th-century 'Ba' rom hermitic revival. As far as I have been able to establish, 'Bar ba'i rdo rje was the first one to describe Chab sti brag dkar as corresponding to La phyi, Mi la ras pa's beloved venue, where he performed *samādhi* and subjugated demonic forces, and which is located in south-western Tibet, today's TAR.

'Bar ba'i rdo rje channeled all of these historical and ritual influences together into one venue. On the occasion of his visit to Chab sti, not only did he recognize the value of this sacred spot, but also recounted its special connection to Chos rje and his former lifetime as Mi la ras pa:

[Situating] at this site, [i.e. at Chab sti] the very meditation venue [i.e. Golden Cave] of [sKyo brag] Chos rje **is the substitute of the power place of La phyi**; he was Lord Mi la ras pa in an earlier lifetime.⁶⁹¹

Both Tshul khriims mthar phyin's son and the second tutor in charge of the training also emphasized the similarity between the original La phyi and Chab sti. La phyi is known as the place where Mi la ras pa had many accomplishments in meditation and in supernatural feats.⁶⁹² By naming the meditation school after La phyi, Tshul khriims mthar phyin consciously drew on many traditional local and pan-Tibetan themes at the same time. Firstly, he reawakened the *gnas* by indicating its link with the favorite abode of Mi la ras pa, of whom he is thought to be a modern embodiment.⁶⁹³ Through the connection with this established sacred spot, Tshul khriims mthar phyin also legitimizes the founding of his hermitage, much like the Ris med masters did to authorize their expansion.

Secondly, by re-evoking the sKyo brag Chos rje, Tshul khriims mthar phyin pays tribute to the great 'Ba' rom yogins and *ras pas* of the past. Moreover, by alluding to a wave of past restoration of 'Ba' rom pa doctrines and hermitic practices, Tshul khriims mthar phyin is

⁶⁹¹ *gnas 'dir chos rje'i sgrub gnas yod pa'i nyid la phyi'i gnas tshab yin shing/ khong gi skye ba snga ma rje btsun mi la yin [...]*/ Bold type mine. Source: gTer chen 'Bar ba'i rdo rje, et al. 1984: f. 448. Compare Yeshe Gyamtso 2005: 181.

⁶⁹² Mi la ras pa, et al. 1997: 567-569.

⁶⁹³ For the original La phyi, see Huber 1997 a and 1997 b.

legitimizing his present revivalist activity with the link to the Ris med movement, which has become the indicator of tradition for many Kham pa lamas of the *sgrub brgyud* today.

VIII.3. Historical note on “meditation schools”

Meditation schools of different type (*sgom grwa/sgrub grwa/sgrub khang/ri khrod*) are hermitages where beginner hermits train individually, but at the same live in a more or less organized group, usually centered around one meditation master.⁶⁹⁴ Thor Bjørnvig, in his analysis of the Tibetan ascetic practices on the example of Mi la ras pa’s *rnam thar* authored by gTsang smyon, distinguishes between “cenobitic” and “eremitic” asceticism. However, the existence of meditation schools provides evidence that these types of asceticism are not always mutually exclusive.⁶⁹⁵

Meditation schools are not a new phenomenon. Many records of Tibetan Buddhism report that great masters were known to have lived in secluded areas in the mountains alongside a group of disciples. Probably the most successful narrative model for this socio-religious phenomenon first appeared in the second half of the 15th century with the emergence of the *Mi la’i mgur ’bum*. This reference goes further back in history, re-telling the 11th-century legend of Mi la ras pa, whose junior *ras pa*-disciples (*ras chung*) settled around him in the mountains; the master and disciples would also move together to another area.⁶⁹⁶ It is true that the great hermit gave the *gtum mo* transmission only individually, but through the closeness of their master, beginners received support, *byin rlabs* as well as further instructions.⁶⁹⁷ Today, the creator of La phyi *sgom grwa* gladly evokes the image of Mi la ras pa’s meditation school.

The great hermit’s disciple sGam po pa is remembered for living in his cave above the monastery of Dwa lha sgam po (which was also the very monastery where Tshul khrims mthar phyin went into the three-year retreat), surrounded not only by his monastic students, but also a large cave-inhabiting community of yogins, who “adopted the twelve ascetic disciplines and meditated continuously, not even pausing to lie down.”⁶⁹⁸

My own observations from the field prove that this form of hermitism is currently flourishing in various parts of Kham, especially in the Sichuan and Qinghai provinces. Most

⁶⁹⁴ Compare Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 161, where the difference between *sgrub grwa* and *sgom grwa* is explained – the first one is focused on the Thabs lam/skyes rim techniques of *yi dam* practice, mantra recitation, etc; while the latter is meant for practitioners of Thar lam/rdzogs rim. However, according to my own observations, the terms *sgom grwa* and *sgrub grwa* are also often used as synonyms across Kham today.

⁶⁹⁵ Bjørnvig 2007.

⁶⁹⁶ Roberts 2007: 85.

⁶⁹⁷ See Mi la ras pa, et al. 1996-1997.

⁶⁹⁸ Stewart 2004: 91, 101. Especially the policy of maintaining sitting posture resembles this case study of La phyi *sgom grwa*.

often it follows a certain pattern, confirmed by similar studies of Antonio Terrone.⁶⁹⁹ The model could be described as follows: one charismatic yogin settles in a remote area; after some time, he attracts followers, who then resolve to live in his immediate presence.⁷⁰⁰

Besides La phyi *sgom grwa*, I have visited 11 meditation schools: from the highly structured meditation training in a sealed (*bcad rgya*) *sgrub khang* that is usually also closely affiliated with the nearby monastery and supported by a visiting teacher, to the open-door training that often also entails intersectarian hermitages, where practitioners are free to join in or leave as they please.

Most of these venues are historical hermitages restored after the Cultural Revolution, but some of them are also new establishments, like La phyi itself. However, all of these forms trace their roots back to the specific convention of hermitic life, which has yogins begin their training by living in a group of people sharing the same objective and the regular, organized access to instructions.

In Chapter Three I presented a brief historical and doctrinal outline of the three-year retreat in the *sgrub khang*. This institutionalized, sealed type of retreat with strict rules also for the input of instructions distinguishes such a training principle from other types of meditation schools; several *sgom grwa* today, including La phyi, encompass one or more *sgrub khang* enclosures within their premises. The rough historical outline which follows in the next paragraphs will therefore be dedicated primarily to hermitages other than the *sgrub khang*.

Evidence of an earlier existence of meditation schools is fragmentary, especially because inhabitants of such *shamanic* institutions were rarely concerned with the production of chronicles and unlike their colleagues in the large monasteries, they were largely disconnected from direct political activity. In order to show that today's venues follow a model that connects them to tradition, I provide a few examples of 19th-century group hermitages.

In the Ris med era, the Gwa gu *ri khrod* in sDe dge area was a famous Sa skya training ground, encompassing many dozens of cabins. It had been founded at a *gnas* dedicated to Avalokiteśvara and directed by teachers who were in connection with the famous rDzong gsar *bshad grwa*, situated in the same region.⁷⁰¹

There were also large open-door retreat facilities, such as the meditation school/*dharma* encampment (*chos sgar*) of the late Ris med master Shākya Shrī, where hundreds of

⁶⁹⁹ Terrone 2010.

⁷⁰⁰ Most of the charismatic lamas I have met or heard of are men.

⁷⁰¹ D.P. Jackson 2003 and Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005. I also visited Gwa gu in 2007 and saw the hermitage blossom as it was directed by the charismatic expert-hermit 'Jam dbyangs seng ge. The original site for male hermits was extended to encompass a large sector for female meditators.

practitioners trained in meditation for several months or years.⁷⁰² The Ris med character of the venue was expressed by its topography: the Mahāmudrā meditators occupied one side of the mountain slope, whereas the rDzogs chen adepts lived on the other side.

Crook and Low report that Shākya Shrī's lineage spread to the Western part of the Himalayas and consequently to several isolated areas of Ladakh, where it developed many "schools for hermits," which were in fact three-year retreats with an extensive preliminary program.

A whole variety of names express the idea of group retreat; they can either describe their different traits or be used synonymously.⁷⁰³ Thus, in addition to the general term *ri khrod* and the very specific *sgrub khang*, one also hears terms such as *sgrub grwa*, *sgrub sde*, *sgom grwa*, etc. Especially interesting are situations when meditation schools are named *chos sgar*, such as in the case of Shākya Shrī's hermitage. This occurs also today, even if the encampment-hermitages have lost their itinerant nature for mostly political reasons.⁷⁰⁴

In Dilgo Khyentse's autobiography, his consort Khandro Lhamo (=mKha' 'gro lha mo, 1913-2003) reports on the existence of a large retreat site centered around the rNying ma pa yogin Trungram Gyaltrul (=Drung ram rgyal sprul?, 19th/20th century).⁷⁰⁵ He stayed in strict seclusion; outsiders were banned from visiting him with an exception of great lamas like Dilgo Khyentse. Gyaltrul followed an austere practice routine, almost never slept and ate only once a week:

His cave was in the middle of a large rock outcropping shaped like a vajra and surrounded by meadows. Five or six hundred disciples lived in the surrounding caves and practiced the Guru Rinpoche *sādhana*.⁷⁰⁶

The model known from today's *sgom grwa* is also one of a master surrounded by disciples in the manner of a *maṇḍala*.

A very important model for La phyi *sgom grwa* and other meditation schools in Nang chen was set in the 19th century at Ge chags monastery,⁷⁰⁷ founded by the yogin Tshangs dbyangs

⁷⁰² Although Shā kya Shrī was a Khams pa lama, his dharma encampment was situated outside of East Tibet. In fact, his influence became even more beyond-regional. Crook & Low (1997) report of the many disciples of this master, who settled in this Western part of the Himalayas and continued his lineage in retreat.

⁷⁰³ For instance *sgrub khang*=*sgrub grwa*=*sgrub sde*.

⁷⁰⁴ Also see Terrone 2010. The *chos sgar* would be an interesting research topic but it unfortunately exceeds the scope of this thesis.

⁷⁰⁵ The orthography of his name is uncertain.

⁷⁰⁶ Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008: 164.

⁷⁰⁷ Other spelling variants Ge bcags, Gad chags and Ge cag. For Ge chags monastery see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 1 and 33-40.

rgya mtsho, disciple to Tshogs gnyis (b.1828).⁷⁰⁸ Following the instructions of his guru, the former master built two nunneries, one of which encompassed 13 retreat centers. An exact description of Ge chags' inner life exists today through Tulku Urgyen, who in his childhood paid frequent visits to this center since his father was responsible for bestowing *rtsa rlung* practice instructions to the nuns there.⁷⁰⁹ Moreover, according to *Nang chen rgyal rabs*, the Ge chags nuns followed a life of strict yogic discipline, never lying down and practicing tirelessly in meditation boxes (*sgom khri*);⁷¹⁰ they were known for *gtum mo* performances that took place once a year where they would place wet sheets on their naked bodies and dry them via the force of their meditation.⁷¹¹

VIII.4. Monastery versus *sgom grwa*

As shown above, not only monasteries or solitary hermitages, but also meditation schools were known in history of Khams and Tibet; and both forms of ritual spheres are currently being revived throughout Eastern Tibet. In spite of the lack of sufficient statistics on the amount of people in group retreat, my own observation has shown that this number for Qinghai and Sichuan is large and constantly growing. In this aspect, the new ethno-religious revival across Khams once again resembles the pre-modern tradition rooted in the Ris med movement, which communicated their ideology and rituals through hermitages, not monasteries – even if the reasons for their modern popularity are complex and involve political, social and religious grounds.

VIII.4.1. The political context

The general favorable condition, crucial for the spreading of hermitages as opposed to monasteries, is the fact that Party authorities perceive the former as less politicized and nationalistic in expression than the latter. Consequently, meditation schools are less controlled when it comes to the quantity of inhabitants and their activity; moreover, due to their less

⁷⁰⁸ Tshogs gnyis is said to have been a student of Kong sprul (Kong sprul, et al. 2003: 217) and a teacher to the aforementioned Shākya Shri.

⁷⁰⁹ See Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 157-162.

⁷¹⁰ For a contemporary example of ascetic practices involving sleeping in meditation boxes, see the daily life of La phyi described in the sections below.

⁷¹¹ Karma phrin las 1965: 69-70, Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 162. Ge chags was rebuilt and is a very active site for group retreat. Their head lamas are based in exile and run suggestive campaigns among their Western students for financing the nuns. See <http://www.gebchakgonpa.org/> (accessed 02.02.2011).

formal nature, founding hermitages often raises fewer objections in the local administration.⁷¹²

In his recent research, Antonio Terrone declares a transition in the local religious landscape with regards to traditional sources of power. According to Terrone, the weakening of monastic institutions in contemporary Khams by the policies of the central government and the regional authorities implementing them has caused the political, economic and ritual destabilization of monasteries, which are currently forced to compete among other institutions on the PRC's market of official religious offers.⁷¹³

Especially, since the 1996 “patriotic education campaign,” CCP leaders have been very watchful and ready to suppress any form of political action in monasteries. The government-enforced political ideology classes, condemnation not only of the actions of the Dalai Lama, but also the ban on his image, as well as the control over monk/nun quotas have driven thousands of monks and nuns out of monasteries into exile or lay life; a growing number of the clergy has been detained or incarcerated on accusation of “splittism.”⁷¹⁴ Since at least 2007, the selection and enthronement of reincarnations is carried out under the auspices of the central government and the local branches of the Religious Affairs Bureau.⁷¹⁵

The advent of the hard-line policy coincides with the great spreading of meditation schools throughout Khams, and life in a hermitage became another option for many who had been expelled from their monasteries. However, the hermits I interviewed were never explicit about this – not only for the sake of avoiding politically sensitive topics, but perhaps most of all, for the sake of the ethos of renunciation itself.⁷¹⁶

With the influx of dissidents, hermitages are once again turning into a counter-movement. Below I will describe the La phyi community and show how this meditation school, even if protected by local authorities, harbors political dissenters. Much more importantly, an examination of the functioning of La phyi *sgom grwa* and the agencies of its main actors ironically prove that their “traditional,” entirely religious discourse and political neutrality conceal strong statements for the endorsement of ethnic uniqueness and autonomy.

⁷¹² See above for the founding of La phyi; also see the story of founding gSer rta bla rung in Sichuan, which was established as a solitary hermitage and grew beyond its original purpose into an academy and *sgom grwa* at the same time. Germano 1998: 62-63.

⁷¹³ Terrone 2009: 77, 81-83.

⁷¹⁴ Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 81-82, Goldstein 1998 b: 48-49, Slobodník 2008.

⁷¹⁵ Slobodník 2011.

⁷¹⁶ Most hermits explain their vocation in religious terms only, and they are taught to use the rhetorics of renunciation from the very beginning of their training at the meditation school. Also see Chapter Ten, where I discuss the vocation at La phyi.

VIII.4.2. The social context

Through the increased government scrutiny and the new desecration of monasteries, their time-honored role as authorities for the local community has been superseded by venues for group retreat like La phyi and encampments (*chos sgar*) similar to those of gSer rta or Ya chen.⁷¹⁷ Such venues present an attractive alternative to monasteries. They are dwellings of experienced Tantric masters and as such they offer traditional religious instructions and structured, time-established training programs that are tailored to the social needs of the day.

If ordained people are all living together at one spot and devoting their time to cultivating religious activities, it may seem to an uninformed observer that their community constitutes a monastery (*dgon pa*). In fact, many of my lay informants throughout Khams often used this designation when referring to their local meditation school also with respect to La phyi. Notwithstanding this simplification in language, the distinction is obvious to lay people; it is mostly evident in the nature of connection of the religious sphere with its surroundings. While the one important social obligation of a monastery is to develop a presence among the lay community around it, which enables a cultural and economic exchange with its environment, a hermitage consists of society focused on inner development. Contrary to the monastery, it rejects providing ritual service for the local community or the conscious opening of a “field of merit,” although it might also achieve these aims in its own specific way. Essentially, the hermitage remains a venue for training religious experts.

Still, in its vehement dedication to performing and accomplishing tradition, the hermitage creates an effective response to modernity and its consequence in the Tibetan areas – the mentioned “identity crisis” – a difficult task for the desecrated and destabilized monastery.

VIII.4.3. The religious context

Both monastery and meditation school contain communities, but for its flexible principles as well as the virtual lack of collective rituals or their informal nature, a *sgom grwa* is more of an assembly of like-minded individuals who follow the same director rather than a precisely structured communal body, where practice is performed collectively.

Historically, the distinction between those two types of religious spheres was not always sharply drawn. As already indicated in Chapter One of this thesis, Gene Smith states that the communities, which appeared around famous masters in their hermitages, marked the

⁷¹⁷ Terrone 2009: 77, 81-83. Ya chen and its connection with La phyi is discussed below.

foundation of the first bKa' brgyud pa monasteries in the time of sGam po pa.⁷¹⁸ The transition was characterized by the emergence of monastic rules and routines. They involved regular group liturgies with an exact hierarchical arrangement, obligations towards the community, as well as the emergence of administration and economic structures to support both property and the monastic *sangha*. What followed were often political responsibilities.

Consequently, many yogic-oriented lamas have come to look down on monastery life and extol the values of free, solitary existence, unbound by ritual or social obligation; a topos found in many *rnam thar*.⁷¹⁹ Another convention often found in religious biographies is that of an evolution through three stages: 1) from worldly, lay existence, 2) through the life of a monastic, 3) to the solitary practice in an isolated location – whereas the last model is largely presented as the most effective for prompt Tantric transformation, “in this very body and life.”⁷²⁰ These steps form the constituents of the renunciation process discussed in greater detail below.

As was always the case with Mi la ras pa, Tshul khrims mthar phyin never engaged in the monastic life at sKyo brag *dgon*, rather started his career of a religious professional directly as a hermit at the *sgrub khang* of Dwa lha sgam po. In accordance with this principle of graded renunciation, group retreat became his transition for more advanced practice. After his *sgrub khang* experience, he was capable of living in complete solitude. It was only due to the pressing requests from his disciples that Tshul khrims mthar phyin founded his own meditation school. When asked why he founded a hermitage instead of a monastery, he replied:

I first wanted to be here alone, but people kept asking me for teachings. I am a hermit (*mtshams pa*) myself, so it is only natural that I would want my students to become hermits as well. Monasteries are worldly places; they are busy and noisy. Organization and chanting scriptures is a waste of time.⁷²¹

On another occasion, when asked about the reason for establishing a center for female practitioners, Tshul khrims mthar phyin remarked that in his opinion, many Khams pa women are “small-minded” (*sems blo rgya chung*),⁷²² so they are neither able to take responsibilities

⁷¹⁸ E. G. Smith 2001: 60.

⁷¹⁹ Compare Rus pa'i rgyan can 2008: 172. Also see Bjørnvig 2007: 90.

⁷²⁰ See the story of Ma gcig Lab sgron in Crook & Low 1997: 297-315.

⁷²¹ Compare Tambiah (1988: 184). As is the case with many of the Thai forest monks, the hermits of La phyi are also concerned with individual asceticism, instructing the ordained, while ritual service for the local community to become “fields of merit” is not among their goals.

⁷²² *Sems blo rgya chung* literally means “narrow-minded,” but in the context of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's statement, the translation into “small-minded” seems more appropriate.

of a monastic, nor take part in the regular monastic rituals; this is why they choose a more informal environment of a hermitage.⁷²³

Down at sKyo brag monastery, many monks have undergone meditation training or are currently getting ready to enter one of the many retreats centers. Local men have many choices for their religious career: according to the management of the monastery, out of ca. 480 monks: 62 have finished a three-year retreat, 25 are in the preparation period and 46 are currently in various types of solitary meditation enclosures. Studying at the college forms a popular transition between the monastery and the *ri khrod*.

Local women who are interested in religious life have a much more modest choice – the only nunnery here is Me thi dge *dgon*, consisting of approximately 300 nuns, is already struggling with housing issues. The six retreat centers connected to sKyo brag monastery, which are meant for women, require a great deal of prior religious schooling, financial resources as well as some time-consuming groundwork, which is why many of women choose La phyi, the one hermitage for women with no entry requirements.

Although meditation schools existed in the past, the creation of one such venue at Chab sti is a novelty in the landscape of sKyo brag. Moreover, the centers that did previously exist here, were not meant for women. For these reasons, I consider Tshul khrims mthar phyin's agency as reformist. In the subchapters below, I shall present this restructuring agency within the larger framework of the present-day hermitic movement.

VIII.4.4. La phyi *sgom grwa* and sKyo brag *dgon* – independence and cooperation

Like in the case of sKyo brag, most monasteries develop their form of meditation training in the *sgrub grwa/sgrub khang*. In this case, the hermitage is dependent on the monastery both ritually and economically.⁷²⁴ On the other hand, meditation schools such as La phyi are self-sufficient, even if they maintain a certain degree of collaboration with the monastery nearby. So what is the nature of the relationship between Tshul khrims mthar phyin's meditation school at Chab sti and the sKyo brag monastery?

sKyo brag manages a network of eleven hermitages.⁷²⁵ That means they are mostly open to monks registered as members of the sKyo brag monastery; whereas the final selection of

⁷²³ See the section on gender-related issues of my case study below and Makley 2005: 270.

⁷²⁴ As for sKyo brag, the monastery supplies only those retreat sites that lie within the immediate vicinity of the monastery premises; the more remote places have to rely on donations from the families of retreatants.

⁷²⁵ For a list, see the section on the 'Ba' rom revival.

candidates for the *sgrub khang* is ultimately made by the abbot, gSal byed rin po che. The monastery head also manages the distribution of food to the trainees. The meditation teachers (*sgrub dpon*) are also assigned by gSal dga'. Moreover, the abbot provides new ideas for the development of the meditation curriculum. He is the one to decide about expansion, e.g. the construction of the new training model for future retreat masters offered for a group of 13 experienced monks.⁷²⁶ From the ritual point of view, gSal byed also definitely controls the hermitages because apart from being their major benefactor, he is either the root guru (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) to most of the retreatants or the ordination master, or both. Therefore, the hermits in the sKyo brag retreats are to follow gSal byed in every way, whether in their life choices or in their practice.

On the other hand, La phyi *sgom grwa* was founded and is guided solely by Tshul khrims mthar phyin, who is not officially associated with sKyo brag *dgon* in any way. Even if he is both a close disciple and “vajra-brother” (*rdo rje'i mched*) to gSal byed, he is fully independent as Tantric teacher and director of the hermitage. As for its beginnings, it was the abbot's idea for Tshul khrims mthar phyin to practice at the caves of Chab sti, but the latter yogin launched the initiative of the La phyi meditation school himself.

gSal byed's donations from Hong Kong helped fund the road and will finance the 16 nuns at the two new three-year-retreat enclosures, but Tshul khrims mthar phyin also receives gifts of money and supplies, which he passes along to his students; Tshul khrims mthar phyin is also their direct *sgrub dpon* and the root guru to most of the practitioners at La phyi, which ensures his ritual status. Moreover, he often gives ordination vows at the hermitage, so the community does not have to rely on gSal dga' for ritual expertise; although some nuns have obtained the vows from him already. Ordination on the spot is an important factor which fosters independence, since many La phyi meditators have no monastery experience and have only received little religious instruction. When they take their vows at La phyi, their daily progress as meditators is monitored and assessed by Tshul khrims mthar phyin alone, even if they go down to sKyo brag a few times a year for teachings and empowerments.

The open-door policy itself is another factor fostering the autonomy of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's meditation school; at the same time, it strengthens his position as guru and central administrator. The free style of guiding practitioners is quite contrary to the structured life at sKyo brag *dgon* and it ensures that the life on the premises is controlled by Tshul khrims

⁷²⁶ Thirteen commemorates the number of sKyo brag Chos rje's legendary disciples.

mthar phyin alone – whoever comes or goes must seek his approval; whatever practice one is performing, its quantity and style is determined by the master.

In fact, as I will explain below, La phyi has made its own alliances independently of sKyo brag: Tshul khrim mthar phyin established a connection with mKhan po A khyug of Ya chen *sgar*, a meditation school located in the remote gSer rta region, Sichuan province.

IX. La phyi *sgom grwa*: The Outer Life

In this and in the following two chapters, I introduce the functioning of the hermitage with the help of a model known from Tantric cosmology – unfolding outer, inner and secret (*phyi nang gsang*) spheres accessible according to the capacities, maturity and engagement of the adept. Although this categorization is not used in the emic description of the hermitage, I apply it here since it is not only relevant for understanding the operation of La phyi but also helpful for unraveling the ritual and social complexity of the hermitic lifestyle in general.⁷²⁷

Specific examples are provided, but generally speaking, one can observe that the *bodhi*-directed activities (which are additionally carried out according to the rules of the hermitage and/or other special ritual conditions) are permissible and welcome in all areas, as is merit-making. Actions stemming from the pragmatic approach are focused primarily on the expected magical efficacy of the secret level, even if outsiders are barred from accessing this deepest stratum. Thus, the *bodhi*, *karma* and pragmatic orientations are present on the different levels of La phyi to a different extent. However, similar to the observations of Wenjie Qin on the “multivocality” of the subjects of her research, in the examples of the La phyi agents presented in this work, it will be difficult to reduce the motivation behind each action to a single intention.⁷²⁸

This is why, as I describe how the three models of approach function at La phyi in its three concentric spheres of hermitic life, the “*bodhi-karma-pragmatic*” model should be understood in parallel to the Samuelian *clerical-shamanic* opposition, i.e. as different tendencies which can be present within one individual or even a single act rather than provide one ultimate explanation for the particular behavior of any agents. One of these inclinations will sometimes be dominant, at other times two or even three types of motivation will coexist in a particular case of agency. Moreover, an emic hierarchy of those tendencies does exist and it is distributed in the topography of La phyi.

In the descriptions to come, all the general information on La phyi *sgom grwa* and its community, which are also public knowledge in the locality, will be disclosed in the section on the “outer life;” the particular examples of vocation and the role of renunciation shall be discussed in the “inner life” part; and the clandestine details concerning the training itself will be unraveled in the paragraphs describing the “secret life.”

⁷²⁷ For the ritual meaning of these levels in Tantric meditation, see Bentor 2002.

⁷²⁸ Qin 2000.

In the sections below I describe the most apparent of the levels of the existence of La phyi *sgom grwa*, i.e. its contextualization within the economic and social reality of the area, the carefully designed topography, the obvious connections to another, similar facility for hermitic training, as well as the daily life and the community itself. This conspicuous stratum of La phyi's construction is also socially important in that it is the very image by which the meditation school is known among the local population and authorities. Since other strata are less accessible and ultimately impenetrable for outsiders, the outer façade of the hermitage is also crucial for spreading its reputation beyond sKyo brag.⁷²⁹

IX.1. La phyi: the environment

Although the social background of La phyi meditators will be discussed below in the section devoted to the members of the retreat community, I would like to briefly bring up the social, political and economic conditions of the environment surrounding La phyi, since they obviously influence life in the hermitage.⁷³⁰

The general economic situation of Yushu TAP has been described as more favorable than in other Tibetan areas. This largely pastoralist area is almost self-sustainable in terms of trading goods within an indigenous Khams pa market.⁷³¹ According to my observations, this is strongly connected to the increasing demand on *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*.⁷³² Moreover, due to its remoteness, virtual lack of arable land and poorly developed communication networks in the prefecture, there has only been very minor Han influx here.⁷³³ Considering the historical record of longstanding autonomy of the Nang chen kingdom, it is natural that the entire Yushu region should appear as an example of flourishing Tibetan culture in both secular and religious aspects. The revival is tolerated by the authorities; since the allegiance to the Tibetan government-in-exile in the prefecture has never been deeply-rooted nor durable, most of the

⁷²⁹ As the outer, inner and secret strata overlap at La phyi, the details exposed in the chapter describing the outer life are not exclusive for determining La phyi's influence on the world outside the hermitage; see the discussion on renunciation in Chapter Ten.

⁷³⁰ For the relation between the outer image of a monastic community and its inner life: compare Qin 2005: 344.

⁷³¹ Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2405-2406.

⁷³² The consumers are mainly Chinese and the Tibetans have developed a whole economic system from collecting to selling.

⁷³³ Official census from 1994 quoted in Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2363 reports the percentage of only 1.4 % Han for the whole Nang chen county area. Although government statistics on Chinese migration into Tibetan areas are a sensitive issue and as such tend to be underrepresented, my observations prove that the Han are hardly visible in the regions outside sKye dgu mdo town and so I assume that the quota has not changed significantly since the time of the census quoted above.

revivalist activities keep away from religious nationalist symbols present elsewhere in the Tibetan areas of the PRC.⁷³⁴

However, the positive economic data largely concerns sKye dgu mdo town along with its surrounding areas. Rural regions such as the sKyo brag area itself are extremely impoverished. The situation at sKyo brag village itself is slightly better only for the few families who run the small restaurants and shops or offer transport to Shar mda' or sKye dgu mdo (public transportation does not exist in this region). In fact, the village seems to have benefitted economically from the revival of religion, seeing that the monastic-hermitic center of sKyo brag as well as the local *gnas* have been attracting a great deal of pilgrims and visitors for the regularly hosted public monastic events. Especially the Prayer Festival has brought substantial growth in the infrastructure of the village. The various celebrations or teachings taking place up to three times a year involve the entire monastic community (amounting to around five hundred in 2008) and since many monks and nuns come down from the ever-growing hermitages above the monastery, they require an increasing number of services.

However, the sKyo brag region outside the township generally remains rural and destitute. Locally active NGOs report high mortality due to malnutrition as well as economic crises caused by frequent weather disasters, which eradicate the number of livestock and diminish the caterpillar fungus crops. The earlier resettlement of nomadic families and the shift from a barter to cash economy has proven to be disastrous for the local balance of resources; many families receive no cash income at all and are completely dependent on the pastoral produce with no optional sources of livelihood.⁷³⁵

As for education, areas like sKyo brag, situated at high altitude are rarely equipped with any learning facilities, resulting in the devastating quota of illiteracy in both Tibetan and Mandarin.⁷³⁶ The nearest government school is located at Shar mda'. This underfinanced facility, offering only basic skills, is inaccessible to many due to the high boarding costs. What is more, it is frequently seen as unacceptable due to the Chinese curriculum which offends the ethnic/nationalist awareness of many Khams pa people living here. Besides, as

⁷³⁴ Also judging by the lack of state propaganda on "national unity." See Marshall & Cooke 1997: 2406.

⁷³⁵ <http://www.jinpa.org/> (accessed 22.12.2010) and Gruschke 2008.

⁷³⁶ Compare <http://www.jinpa.org/> (accessed 22.12.2010) and <http://www.medicinefortibet.org/home> (accessed 22.12.2010) concerning west Nangchen: "Less than 1% of the population are literate in even Tibetan let alone Chinese. The average annual income is less than \$20 per year."

Gruschke has observed, enrolling children for education often poses a problem for small families, who thus reduce the labor force required to run a pastoralist household.⁷³⁷

Here is what Jinpa NGO, active in the west Nang chen region and also specifically at sKyo brag and in La phyi itself, reports on schooling in this area:

The only education available to most nomads is at monasteries through becoming a monk or nun. The government has a few schools out in the nomadic areas. The schools that do exist are only for the few and better off. This education is only for 3 years. If you are a nomad with an income of only \$20 per annum, there is little hope. By necessity the pupils who are lucky enough to get a place at a school have to board as their families are so far away and moving about.⁷³⁸

In fact, it is not only religious education that is available in the monasteries. As moral authorities and the few individuals in this impoverished region with access to resources, many lamas feel obliged to perform charity work and to offer the community at least basic education in Tibetan writing, if possible.⁷³⁹ There is one orphanage in the sKyo brag area, financed by the combined forces of mKhan po Dam chos zla ba and a Western NGO, which also provides basic education; as is indicated in the following descriptions of La phyi, one such school is also located at this hermitage.

It is easy to anticipate that without the fundamental education and Mandarin skills, Tibetans from these regions have an underprivileged position on the career market of Yushu TAP, and they are destined to work in the pastoralist sector, which rarely yields more profits than it takes to feed one's family; social networks that would enable these people to migrate to the larger towns are also very weak.⁷⁴⁰

Concerning government representation at sKyo brag, the status of the village in the PRC's administrative system is that of a "rural township" (Chin. *xiang*). As such, it is administered by two officials, ranking lowest in the Party hierarchy. Their responsibilities are less clearly defined than in county seats (*xian*) or prefectures (*diqu*).⁷⁴¹ At the sKyo brag township, as is often the case in the rural Tibetan areas, both of these officials are indigenous Khams pas.

⁷³⁷ Gruschke 2008: 26.

⁷³⁸ <http://www.jinpa.org/people.html> (accessed 22.12.2010). There are numerous other NGOs active in the Nang chen region or greater Yushu area. They all stress the considerable economic disadvantages of the local population.

⁷³⁹ This includes local lamas like the sKyo brag abbot gSal byed, the college dean Dam chos zla ba, the ritual master Karma Rab brtan; as well as exiled lamas such as Bardor Tulku and Sonam Tenzin. Their activities are focused on providing medical care as well as basic education for the sKyo brag area.

⁷⁴⁰ See Gruschke 2008: 26.

⁷⁴¹ Compare "Administrative divisions of the People's Republic of China," at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_the_People%27s_Republic_of_China (accessed 23.12.2010).

What is more, one of them, a 42-year-old man called Srung ma is also a devout disciple of both gSal byed and Tshul khriims mthar phyin.

This is how the local government made the founding of La phyi *sgom grwa* possible in 2005, when the Chab sti brag surroundings were officially donated for religious and educational purposes under the direction of Tshul khriims mthar phyin. In 2008, I met Srung ma at Tshul khriims mthar phyin's "audience cave" at La phyi *sgom grwa*. He came to discuss the new road project that would make it possible to reach Tshul khriims mthar phyin's caves by car (with four-wheel drive) from the place at La phyi's lower level where the passable road ends.⁷⁴²

IX.2. Topography: the physical setting

The village of sKyo brag has grown around the monastery; its economic and architectural development follows the expansion of the monastic-hermitic center. Though still contextualized in the mundane world, it is a ritual territory for pilgrimage, monastic and scholastic activities, which is why it can form a proper transition for the venues of ultimate renunciation, i.e. the hermitages situated above the village: one of these hermitages is the meditation school of La phyi.

Tshul khriims mthar phyin's meditation school is located in the elevated, mountainous area above sKyo brag. It is a few hours on foot or a much shorter car ride to the hermitage from the village below. The road to the main area of the retreat center was financed by gSal byed rin po che of the sKyo brag monastery with a donation made by a Han disciple. It was constructed by thirty-two local families, who took turns working on assigned road sections.

The hermitage itself stretches throughout the lower and higher levels of the Chab sti brag dkar *gnas*. The entire La phyi premises are naturally and ritually divided into two strata, which I call Level 0 and Level 1.

IX.2.1. Level 0

Level 0 is located at an altitude of around 4.400 meters AMSL and it is the meditation school's ground floor. It is situated on an uneven, grassy plain where basic training is carried out, huts for individual retreat are built, and unordained people and hermits' families are allowed at times even along with their farm animals.

La phyi is still in the phase of rapid growth. In 2008, many cabins and larger edifices on this level were being constructed with the help of lay workers who slept in tents situated away

⁷⁴² For the topography, see below.

from the nuns' quarters. That year, three larger buildings were being completed – a temple to fit a huge prayer-wheel (*skor khang*) and two *sgrub khang*-enclosures for sealed, three-year retreat, each meant to accommodate eight practitioners.⁷⁴³ They were to become dwellings for sixteen nuns and then ritually sealed in November that same year, to be opened exactly three years, three months and three days after the sealing date.⁷⁴⁴

The lowest hut at Level 0 is home to Tshul khrims mthar phyin's unordained family members: his mother, one of the sisters and the relatives who occasionally visit La phyi.

Level 0 is also where the daily and the extraordinary ceremonies take place. For these occasions, a small and modest wooden 'du khang with the capacity to fit approximately 50-60 seated persons was erected. During breaks between the mediation sessions, the residents go about doing their chores: cooking, fetching water, yak dung or wood for construction; finally, there is the construction work itself, carried out with the help of the nuns. Level 0 is completely quiet only during meditation sessions and in the night, as the nuns engage in their practice or rest and the workers assemble in their tents.⁷⁴⁵

In 2007, the La phyi premises only had half of the retreat huts that were present when I arrived here in 2008. At the time of that second visit, the thirty-nine cabins, most of them meant for a double, triple or sometimes even quadruple inhabitation, were home to the constantly shifting number of the resident and guest community. Since in 2008 there were around 150 nuns (only 70 the year before), the number of huts is the most visible mark of prosperity of this *ri khrod*.

Although prior to October 2008, there had been plans to build a shop with such necessities as candles, matches, rice, dry provisions or basic medications, a year later the shop shed still lay unfinished as a project of lesser priority and was used as storeroom for donated rice sacks.⁷⁴⁶

The roughly delineated lavatory area is situated in the middle of the plain in a ditch-like rift of black soil, which separates the premises of the hermitage into several sections. Residents and guests are free to relieve themselves right in the center of this sacred ground. The upper part of the ditch is an important meeting point for the La phyi community: it is the provisional

⁷⁴³ As for the legal status of the development: smaller huts do not require a construction permit, and the permit to erect the larger buildings, like the *sgrub khang* enclosures, was granted on grounds of their "educational" purpose.

⁷⁴⁴ The inauguration of the lower *sgrub khang* at Level 0 was planned to take place on the full moon day in November 2008.

⁷⁴⁵ The composition and functioning of the Level 0 and Level 1 communities will be described as follows.

⁷⁴⁶ Shops of this sort are an integral element of facilities in other group hermitages that I have visited throughout Khams.

faucet with spring water conducted through an underground pipe, which was built by the previously mentioned Jinpa NGO.⁷⁴⁷ Another faucet is located on the north-western part of the Level 0 plain.

One of the lower cabins is larger in size and used as a grammar school for about 10 local children aged 6-12 who live here and are fully integrated into the life of the hermitage: they all wear monastic robes, have shorn hair and are required to adhere to the rules. Mostly relatives of the nuns here, the children are accommodated individually in the respective cabins inhabited by their aunt, cousin or sister.

Animals are allowed on Level 0. Pilgrims or families visiting their relatives in retreat will at times bring their dogs or yak herds along. Some nuns keep dogs or cats; I have also seen goats that they saved from slaughter.

The location of the new huts is determined by the manager-monk (*gnyer pa*) or by the master personally. This order of things does not only connote the normal guru-disciple obedience, but in this case, emphasizes the common sense of a man who, in spite of his current high status, possesses plenty of labor experience himself. The cost of building one hut amounts to approx. 20,000 RMB. But regardless of the newcomer's financial situation, the cabins should remain small.⁷⁴⁸ Construction of individual huts is carried out by the family of the future nun, who in the Nang chen dialect is referred to as a "woman of virtue" (*dge ma*).

Level 0 is also a venue of "contested place." The original *gnas* of Chab sti brag, described above, has lately been refined with additional layers of overlapping ritual territory. This occurred through the vision of another contemporary, recently deceased local siddha, master in both Mahāmudrā and rDzogs chen traditions. The yogin Ye shes Rab rgyas (?-1999)⁷⁴⁹ perceived the flat surface in the West of the plain below Chab sti as a Cakrasaṃvara (*khor lo sdom pa/khor lo bde mchog*) *maṇḍala*, and the triangular cave in a boulder slightly underneath as the abode of Vajrayoginī (*rdo rje phag mo*).⁷⁵⁰ In fact, this draws on the theme of the original La phyi and thus legitimizes the founding of the hermitage.

The Phag mo cave is used for special forms of retreat like the *Mi la bla sgrub*; the nuns who assist with the ceremony are visible outside when they play the bone-trumpet (*rkang*

⁷⁴⁷ See <http://www.jinpa.org/> (accessed 24.10.2010).

⁷⁴⁸ See the sections on daily life for the description of a construction of a new cabin.

⁷⁴⁹ Ye shes rab rgyas was also one of gSaI byed rin po che's gurus as well as local revivalists; see sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 301-307. Numerous legends surround his life and tales of miracles he performed are repeated throughout the sKyo brag area. After his death in 1999, his life-sized wax figure was manufactured in China and placed in one of the chambers of the sKyo brag tower. For the photograph of the statue see "Yushu Earthquake and relief trip" at http://www.baromkagyu.org/tibet_trihtml (accessed 24.10.2010).

⁷⁵⁰ Compare Huber 2006: 2.

gling). The bDe mchog-*gnas* forms the basis and the courtyard for the upper three-year retreat enclosure.

Leaving Level 0, one climbs up an uneven, grassy terrain. Depending on the condition and age of the hiker, this usually takes from 30 to 45 minutes. On the way up, there is a large and comfortable-looking hut, which belongs to the manager-monk 'Jigs med grags pa. This cabin also serves as a “clinic” (*sman khang*) and storeroom for medical supplies.

IX.2.2. Level I

Level I is clearly meant for more advanced practice and in fact, when asked for teachings, Tshul khrims mthar phyin made clear that the upper plane is the only appropriate place for this activity and described Level 0 as a public “waiting area” (*sa mdo 'gag*).⁷⁵¹

The advanced sector is situated a good 400 meters over the plain of Level 0 at the side of the remote white cliff wall of Chab sti, with its large, oblong, caves gaping high up above the ground level. It is almost always silent here, except for the rare visit of officials or donors who demand to see Tshul khrims mthar phyin as the expert-hermit. In these cases, guests are expected to respect the silence of this yogic abode, and if louder sound touches the ears of the sealed meditators on Level I, a loud “*phat!*” can be heard from the few minute cabins.⁷⁵²

The largest man-made structure in this pristine environment of approximately 4.800 meters AMSL is the two-story, maroon red *sgrub khang*. It was built in 2007 and houses four monks in sealed three-year retreat. Below, on the side of the inclusion, there is a reddish boulder, bearing large, paw-like signs that are said to belong to Padmasambhava's tigress left on the occasion of his visit to sKyo brag area while appearing in this particular spot in the form of rDo rje gro lod.⁷⁵³ The farthest and uppermost points, small hills or rocks of Level I are adorned with abundant prayer-flags (*rlung rta*) that form one circular shape, which are otherwise attached to 50cm-poles stuck into the ground and scattered around.

It is also here at Level I on the right hand-side of the *sgrub khang* that the *ras pa* manifested an important sign of Tantric accomplishment, a hand imprint (*phyag rjes*) on a solid rock wall at the height of approximately 1.60 meters.

Level I also contains three retreat cabins, a small two-storey building with a kitchen underneath and a meditation hut above it, which, as I was informed, is used by the *ras pa*

⁷⁵¹ Goldstein 2001: 570, s.v. “*mdo 'gag*.”

⁷⁵² A sharp-sounding syllable applied in meditation, in this case as a means against severe mental clinging to disturbances.

⁷⁵³ rDo rje gro lod is one of the eight principal forms of Padmasambhava and is depicted as mounted on a pregnant tigress. See U rgyan gling pa 2006: xv.

during the night. It is called “bsTan dga’s house” since its construction was sponsored by a lay government official by that name who wanted to build a retreat house here for when he retires.

One of the huts presently hosts two nuns from the far-away academy of Ya chen who are in retreat here also for political reasons.⁷⁵⁴ There are also five stone cabins, or rather booths so tiny that they can hardly fit a grown person sitting cross-legged. One of them is built on the edge of a cliff and others are glued to the Chab sti wall, some hovering ten to twenty meters above ground level. These special cave-like booths are meant for the most advanced *gtum mo* practitioners, including the master himself, who uses them at will. Inside there may be a small sheep skin on the floor, a few pictures of lamas and deities on the wall and the large front window, some of them with a single glass pane, some without. One of Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s favorite booths of this sort is actually a half-cave with the especially constructed front wall with a large, glass-less window. It is used as the official place to give formal instructions. The cave-booth is equipped with his *rdor rje* and bell as well as modern and somehow unusual implements such as a large alarm clock and a jar of candy, which he offers to disciples during audiences.

The *ras pa*-cabins were constructed with the help of the lama himself, who takes pleasure in physical labor, and local families.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s *ras pa* disciples are not at La phyi any longer; they went into sealed retreat in the nearby Khang ne monastic complex. Similarly to the Thai mountain hermitage described by Tambiah, the final step in the training at La phyi constitutes moving away to a remote and solitary site, where one can practice undisturbed.⁷⁵⁵ This had been done by the two most-advanced *ras pa* disciples.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s favorite cave-huts are the least accessible ones, which are situated high above the ground. The small community at Level I also has two small cabins that accommodate 1-2 lay people, usually older family members of either the *ras pa* or of the manager-monk. The bath house (*chu khang*) is a miniature stone cabin revealing the presence of a modern, though unused bathtub – a somewhat peculiar sight in this secluded and ascetic environment. I was told it was built by the parents of one of the *sgrub khang* trainees and that the water-pipe is the same that was installed by the Jinpa NGO.

⁷⁵⁴ In the fall of 2008, following the post-olympic uprising, monks and nuns could not freely travel in Sichuan, where Ya chen is located. More on the Ya chen- La phyi connection below.

⁷⁵⁵ Tambiah 1988: 139.

There is a donated solar panel in front of the kitchen building, used to collect heat for boiling water. Handling food donations and shopping in the sKyo brag village is organized by the manager-monk. The kitchen is run by several nuns from Level 0 who carry the supplies up in large bags from down below. Although plain and grimy, the kitchen is the largest room on Level I with no ritual boundaries, so it is often used as Tshul khrims mthar phyin's "audience room." He receives his guests while sitting in a battered meditation box padded with a worn mat. The cooking stove is close and kitchen utensils all around. In this unpretentious setting, there are no conspicuous signs of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's high position in the local religious hierarchy, only a few small dilapidated pictures depicting bKa' brgyud pa deities and lamas decorate the sooty walls.

However, if the purpose of the visit is receiving instructions (*gdams ngag*) or blessing (*byin rlabs*), the master will prefer to bestow these in his favorite ritual territory, i.e. sitting in his cave-booth.

Most of the edifices on Level I (the *sgrub khang*, the tiny *ras pa* booths, the kitchen and the retreat cabins) were sponsored and constructed by people from Tshul khrims mthar phyin's home village of Kha cham or other local areas (while it has to be noted that not all of them are related to the hermits living here). As a man with a history of physical labor, Tshul khrims mthar phyin knows about construction and he himself helped in the process, which is very unusual for a high lama. He eagerly inspects the building sites at Level 0 a few times a day to scrutinize the work process, the building materials and the well-being of the workers. On these visits, his presence is striking – the sole white mark of his cotton robe among the soiled, dark blue overalls of the laborers and the red robes of his disciples.

Towering above Level I, and located on the back wall of the Chab sti brag rock formation is the legendary gSer phug where the master sKyo brag Chos rje practiced with his consort. The cave is mostly unused, but Tshul khrims mthar phyin and gSal byed rin po che are said to each have meditated there over longer periods of time.

In 2008, Tshul khrims mthar phyin accepted a donation from one of his Taiwanese students in order to expand the site.

IX.3. The construction of the ritual setting and reconstruction of the past as a means of identity negotiation

The historical framework for the emergence of La phyi *sgom grwa* is shaped by the past of the Nang chen kingdom, the 'Ba'rom school as well as of the sKyo brag monastic-hermitic center, as they have been described in earlier chapters of this work.

Since historical allusions and religious symbols are crucial arguments in this example of cultural revival, according to the scale proposed by Robert Bellah and mentioned in the previous chapters, La phyi is essentially a neotraditionalist project. This means that both ritual and history are applied simultaneously in the La phyi context. However, the constant allusions to the religious past reflected in the construction of the meditation school cannot be perceived as an automatic method to return to ways of life perpetrated before the Chinese communists appeared here in the 1950s. As Appadurai noted, drawing on history as a source for present action is a selective process, aimed at achieving a certain objective. This is why traces of the ritual past in the La phyi landscape should be seen as a strategy used for specific, modern means that suit the interests of the agents of the revival.

The La phyi project must first of all be contextualized in the wider framework of the contemporary ethno-religious revival occurring across Khams. It should also be seen in the context of the sKyo brag 'Ba' rom revival. Similarly to the Ris med renaissance era, many of today's revivalists channel their activity through constructing new hermitages at local power places.

Today, the popularity of hermitages is maintained for several reasons. Firstly, the authorities perceive meditation schools as less politicized as monasteries, which opens possibilities for a certain degree of autonomy within the styles of religious discourse permitted in the PRC. Secondly, this mass revival of hermitic practice is achieved through the involvement of many individuals brought up in the post-Mao and post-Deng environment. As they undergo a fundamental conversion through their commitment to renunciation, a radical social transformation is bound to occur. Therefore, in the Summary Chapter of the case study, I argue that the La phyi project and its community contain millenarian tendencies, exhibited throughout modern-day Khams.

Today, much like in the Ris med period, building hermitages is a new way of winning new ground to achieve goals that extend over doctrinal expansion. Developing the Chab sti *gnas* into a group hermitage takes place with the help of traditional ritual rhetoric, which has been very rich at sKyo brag. Simultaneously, the project displays different undercurrents typical of “contested space” that this power place has been from very early on. The previous competitors are invoked to recreate, as Germano put it, the entire “multicolored fabric” of the old Tibetan world.⁷⁵⁶ The 'Ba' rom pa, Karma pa and rNying ma pa influences re-emerge to reconstruct the pre-Mao landscape of sKyo brag.

⁷⁵⁶ Germano 1998.

What is unique in post-Mao Khams, is the frequent competition of economic and ritual spheres, as tourism and the commercial harvesting of plants at times interfere with pilgrimage or other ritual activities.⁷⁵⁷ Still, perhaps for their remoteness and neotraditionalism, La phyi and sKyo brag lie beyond the tourist and commercial interests. Especially at La phyi, even visitors who come as tourists (which happens rarely due to its obscurity and the non-existent tourist infrastructure) will either turn into pilgrims or they will be sent home.

Today, the territory of Chab sti has become an object of competition again, but this time the players are different; they are neither Buddhist lineages, local chieftains, nor monastic districts. In the new context, the competitors are on one hand, the local community inhabiting this area, and on the other – its official proprietor – the People’s Republic of China. This gives “contested place” a whole new meaning.

In 1950, representatives of the communist system arrived here and declared this region to be their own: not only *de iure*, as in the time of General Ma, but *de facto*. From 1950 until the late 1970s, they desecrated the site, killed lamas representing local lineages or imprisoned them; they destroyed the monastic and hermitic compound along with its sacred statues, relics and other consecrated objects. Even at Chab sti, where there was no ritual infrastructure that could be demolished, the Marxist doctrine the Chinese brought became especially threatening to the status of Chab sti as *gnas*, since Marxist materialism completely stripped the site of its cosmological value. In the due course, pilgrimage and meditation was prohibited at sKyo brag and Chab sti; former practitioners were forced to work in collectives; the monastic manor was divided into units of communal property of the Party, the people and the state. Hundreds of years of cultural continuity was brought to a halt, sources of local power and traditional identity extinguished.

When the state reversed its oppressive policies with regard to the Tibetan minority, the revival slowly began at sKyo brag – a reaction to pressure as in Wallace’s example of social organism. Under these circumstances, for Tshul khrims mthar phyin, gSal dga’ and other agents, reconstructing history at La phyi once again became an argument of authority, used to bridge the 20-year cultural rupture, as well as to counteract the sacrilege of the *gnas* and of its past.

To design the hermitage according to traditional principles is to perform an act of memory, indispensable for cultural survival, as Vettori has said. By recreating the traditional landscape of a meditation school, the La phyi hermits are proving their “unbroken connection” with the

⁷⁵⁷ Germano 1998, Peng Wenbin 1998.

past, a factor important for any society in a post-traumatic reconstruction phase, but absolutely necessary for the survival of Tibetan Buddhism with its emphasis on the unpolluted quality (*dri ma med pa*) of or unbroken continuity (*rgyun chad med pa*) between past and present.⁷⁵⁸ By developing the *gnas* into a hermitage, Cha sti and sKyo brag are remembered as places of great yogic power and political autonomy, situated in the ancient hermitic kingdom of Nang chen. This contrasts the present position of sKyo brag as Juela Xiang, a tiny spot on the map of the PRC, a provincial township-village in the impoverished Nangqian county, located in the south-west of the remote Qinghai province and inhabited by members of one of the dozens of minorities of the vast country of China.

The quest to re-establish sKyo brag as a sphere of power and autonomy is understandable also because in the past, this monastic-hermitic center enjoyed a great deal of independence. As a part of the Nang chen kingdom, its internal affairs like the social system, culture and religion were largely unaffected by the various superpowers which nominally controlled it. Especially in the beginning of its existence, the direct power at Nang chen belonged to lords whose rule united ritual and political significance and who were legendary Tantric masters. As the Nang chen realm developed, sKyo brag arose as a semi-independent *be hu* unit, whose religious, political and economic supremacy was recognized by the monarch and the population.

Therefore today, adapting the Chab sti *gnas* to create an exclusive sphere of radical “role-blockage” becomes a potent way to re-invent sKyo brag as realm of self-rule. As its autonomy was finally compromised, the rich array of power narratives from sKyo brag’s past were summoned and channeled into present reality. The result was the emergence of the La phyi hermitage.

IX.3.1. Re-mandalization

Prior to the communist invasion, Khams had regularly been raided by foreign armies, which also slew the clergy and destroyed the monasteries and *stūpas*. Moreover, in the sections on the history of Nang chen, I mention how the advance of Chinese nationalism and commerce had influenced the sKye mgu mdo area already in the first decades of the 20th century. But none of these foreign influences – be they Mongol tribes, rival sects, Manchu armies, Lha sa troops, or Chinese warlords – had ever attempted to dismantle the fundamental order of the Buddhist universe reflected through symbols and rituals, social roles and relations

⁷⁵⁸ Compare the presentation of sKyo brag history in ’Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 1: 97 and sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999: 292, 303.

and projected onto the local landscape. In contrast to this, the Maoist regime endeavored to erase the traces of this order also through the coerced remodeling and “correcting” the Tibetans’ memory and mindset. Even though there were no facilities to destroy and no monks to persecute at the isolated area of Chab sti, when the Chinese communists came, the ground became desecrated anyway by forcing its abandonment and imposing view and conduct that deprived the territory of its cosmological content.

Therefore, the first necessary step in the local revival was the “re-mandalization” of Chab sti brag dkar, as Charlene Makley put it, or reawakening of a site after the Maoist period, in order to reinstall it as holy ground that expresses the value of past narratives and identities. For La phyi’s main agents Tshul khrims mthar phyin and gSal byed, it was a matter of reinvoking models of authority from the past of sKyo brag and Chab sti. Thus, the land itself became a vital resource for the revival, much in the spirit of Quintman’s “place-memory,” which points to the interconnectedness of places, narratives and identities in Tibetan cultures.⁷⁵⁹

At sKyo brag, re-invoking the past does not pose many difficulties, because its history virtually overflows with charismatic lamas and symbols of religious and worldly power. In fact, much of the historiography and oral tradition of this region is connected to authority in one way or another, so by recreating the history, the main agents of La phyi empower and ennoble themselves. Their elevated status is not only in a stark contrast to their status as members of one of the PRC’s minorities, but also, because their authority relies on past identities, their status helps to heal the trauma of destruction that started in 1950 and was continued until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

The elaborate historical narratives describing sKyo brag and Chab sti as power places have been described above. However, from 1958 to the 1980s, these accounts lay hidden in the landscape and in the memory of the local community, resembling a collective gTer. Every practice aimed at celebrating the *byin rlabs* of the *gnas*, whether pilgrimage or meditation was illegal. After the radical shift in Beijing policies, the local narratives of power could again become projected onto the landscape in its *clerical* as well as *shamanic* form. Beginning in 1980, the monastery was rebuilt, and Seng ge gnam rdzong, sPyi ’byams and Chab sti were open for pilgrims and meditators again.

The process of re-mandalization was well on its way, when a new figure appeared on the religious scene at sKyo brag. The newcomer was not an heir to any of the local reincarnate

⁷⁵⁹ Quintman 2008.

lineages – in fact, he was an ordinary, middle-aged or even elderly monk like many others, who also committed himself to celibacy in the later years of his life.⁷⁶⁰ Still, his emergence became a powerful boost for the “re-cosmologization” of the area.

Thus, in 1993, Tshul khriims mthar phyin began to roam around the Chab sti *gnas* to meditate on his own, following the advice of gSal dga', his *clerical* “alter ego.” He was determined to emulate both the lifestyle of his guru Karma nor bu and legendary Mi la ras pa. However, it was not only Tshul khriims mthar phyin’s dedication, practice style or his lineage that enabled him to experience his personal transformation from a former village work point-system cadre to “The Third Mi la ras pa.” It was also the ritual history and the charisma of the Chab sti *gnas* itself. By re-connecting with this local *gnas*, the significance of Tshul khriims mthar phyin’s solitary mountain period exceeded individual experience and became a potent time for a post-Mao conversion of the landscape as well as for igniting the collective imagination of the local community.

As it has been noted by Quintman and Gardner, location plays a special role in the production of culture in Tibetan societies. Here is a case of a yogin, whose life was shaped by a place and who has simultaneously influenced this place with his presence. This mutual relationship also reflects the Tantric view on the practitioner’s body. Inspired by the Indic *pīṭha* -cult propagated in the Tantras, the Tibetan *gnas yig* literature has often elaborated on the correspondence between points of the inner “vajra-body” (*rdo rje'i lus*) and sacred sites (*gnas*). According to this ideology, the inner wisdom energies (*ye shes kyi rlung*) present in the energy wheels (*'khor lo*) will be awakened sooner if the yogin works with them in an environment endowed with special qualities that express the presence of enlightened deities (i.e. *maṇḍala*; Tib. *dkyil 'khor*).⁷⁶¹ This was one of the reasons why the Ris med masters established the network of their hermitages at power places. Thus, such sites, including the Chab sti *gnas* itself, have traditionally served as catalysts for Tantric transformation.

Gavin Flood notes that ascetic practice is internalizing cosmology in the body, whereas “the enactment of ritual symbolically repeats the emergence and withdrawal of the cosmos.”⁷⁶² The highest Tantras always emphasize the ultimate union of microcosm (the practitioner’s body) and macrocosm (the universe comprising the pure and impure beings and phenomena). This explains the belief that meditation benefits the environment. Even if

⁷⁶⁰ This is in keeping with the custom of elderly people taking up monastic vows. This custom was again taken up in the 1980s. (Note that in an area of low life-expectancy, 40 years old is perceived as old age).

⁷⁶¹ Compare Ngawang Zangpo 2001: 175-176.

⁷⁶² Flood 2004: 11.

already sacred, the area can still become more potent: at the moment of establishing an equilibrium between the enlightened energies inside and outside, the body of an accomplished being is transformed into a *maṇḍala* that influences the locality by its mere presence. As Tshul khrims mthar phyin's guru, Karma nor bu expressed it:

[...] my body, this *maṇḍala* of the Victorious Ones [...].⁷⁶³

So how did “mutual empowerment” occur between Tshul khrims mthar phyin and the *gnas* of Chab sti brag dkar? First of all, the power of local tradition, which was deposited in the landscape of the sKyo brag area and celebrated the great yogins of the past, sanctified the endeavors of an obscure yogin that Tshul khrims mthar phyin was in the beginning. The same tradition maintains that a special environment of a *gnas* greatly aids in meditation and serves as a catalyst for Tantric transformation. Indeed, within merely six years of his hidden, solitary training at Chab sti, Tshul khrims mthar phyin was not only able to survive alone in the harsh conditions, relying on wild plants, utter lack of proper shelter and fire (already considered a supernatural feat by most of my informants), but also demonstrate all traditional signs of accomplishment, comparable to his famed guru and Mi la ras pa himself.

Herein lies another paradox that is resolved by the practice of hermitism. Situated far away from worldly affairs, Chab sti not only became the place where Tshul khrims mthar phyin understood the nature of the world, but also his tool for this recognition:

For the hermit, his natural environment, the wilderness is both world and antiworld, a nonplace from which the world could be condemned and a metaphor of the world itself.⁷⁶⁴

In the post-Mao era, the social significance of his triumph extends beyond the context of Tantric tradition, the “internalization” of its goal, as Flood put it.⁷⁶⁵ The personal victory of the meditator becomes a statement of cultural uniqueness and ethnic power. Tshul khrims mthar phyin's distinct, white robe of a *ras pa*, recognizable at the first sight as the hallmark of the uniquely Tibetan tradition, is not only a demonstration of his almost supernatural skill to survive in remote mountains without even basic provisions but also an exhibition of the survival of indigenous culture, its validity and efficacy, even after the years of persecution and inertia.

⁷⁶³ [...] *rang lus rgyal ba'i dkyil 'khor 'di* [...]. (from the *nyams mgur*-section in *Grub pa'i dbang phyug karma gzhan phan chos kyi rgya mtsho'i rnam thar*, no pagination).

⁷⁶⁴ Harpham 1992: 21.

⁷⁶⁵ Flood 2004: ix.

Thanks to Tshul khrim mthar phyin's success story, the legends of past masters buried in the Chab sti ground could now be re-discovered and re-installed as paradigms relevant for identity formation. The emergence of Tshul khrim mthar phyin as local saint was a spectacular triumph of tradition that could give the community, both lay and ordained, the confidence that in spite of their subjugation, instrumentalization, and the ruptures in the continuity of local lineages, that their culture was not only still relevant, but that its triumph bore such conspicuous results.

The Inner Heat, for all its secretive training, is said to produce tangible effects. Tshul khrim mthar phyin's fame spread quickly, primarily because he had been accredited with supermundane acts, such as enduring the severity of the elements and melting snow with his body heat. Consequently, although he was a dedicated hermit, he could no longer avoid accepting disciples. In this way, social empowerment followed; as in the cases of yogins described elsewhere, Tshul khrim mthar phyin was not so much acclaimed for his ethical assets or meditation capacities, rather for the feats which triggered the folk's imagination.⁷⁶⁶

The key to the successful revival of Tibetan mythology is the close relationship to the local landscape.⁷⁶⁷ From the emic point of view, what happened during Tshul khrim mthar phyin's secret years at Chab sti was the union of the micro- and macrocosm through *gtum mo* meditation, which resulted in taming the elements. This resembles the biographic frescos portraying the symbolic narrative of Mi la ras pa's time at the original La phyi, where he performed union-yoga (Skt. *karmamudra*; Tib. *las kyi phyag rgya*) with the female *genius loci* Tshe ring ma. Taming (*'dul ba*) the forces of nature both inside and outside one's body by means of yogic discipline and magic is a popular theme in the *rnam thar*, beginning with Mi la ras pa as the role model as well as rGod tshang pa (1189-1258) and Zhabs dkar ba (1781-1850/1), etc. The modern example of Tshul khrim mthar phyin reveals that this topos continues to fascinate the Tibetan mind.

For hermits, the outer environment represents their inner landscape. This inner wilderness is approached methodically, and the practitioners identify hindrances to be tamed. The most coarse disturbances are the five afflictive emotions (*nyon mongs lnga*), which correspond to the five elements. The next layers are conceptualization (*rnam rtog*) and mental habits (*bag chags*). All of this comprises the wild (*rgod*), i.e. untrained mind.

For advanced yogins, the physical and mental hardships connected with living in the mountains are not just the necessary price of their determination; they are seen as essential

⁷⁶⁶ Compare Tambiah 1988.

⁷⁶⁷ Germano 1998: 84.

support in the Tantric mind-body transformation, providing the necessary fuel and opportunity to practice the advanced yogas. Karma nor bu's biography states:

[...] by means of austerities of “equal taste”⁷⁶⁸ [in] whatever happens and with great courage, [Karma nor bu] applied himself to practicing meditation in an unrelenting and vigorous manner like the steady flow of a river. [...] In this way, he performed the conduct of a [true] yogin.⁷⁶⁹

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's austerities included his isolation, anxiety and the cold, which he could turn into “the blissful heat of *gtum mo*,” the hunger and the pain offered the stimulus to the *bcud len* practice.⁷⁷⁰ Moreover, the hermit asserts that the *vīras* and *ḍākinīs* inhabiting the *gnas* also helped him by providing food, much like they helped his guru, Karma nor bu at the *gnas* where he had practiced. In this way, the traditional narratives present in the landscape of Chab sti and accessible through yogic discipline, could not only be re-discovered, but also literally consumed and embodied.

Consequently, by means of the *gtum mo*, the yogin attained liberation (*thar pa*) from his own suffering, along with the control over his mental and physical realities both inside and outside, which became inseparable, since accomplishment causes dualistic perception (*gnyis snang*) to erode.⁷⁷¹ His mind could rest in the state of bliss, independently of the circumstances, and his body was warm in spite of the lack of clothes and shelter; it was satisfied in spite of the lack of food. Thus, in the eyes of the at sKyo brag inhabitants, his body became a symbol of victory, a triumph of indigenous tradition, achieved in spite of the fortunes or misfortunes of Tibetans, vulnerable to the shifting policies of the state.

As if to seal his power over Chab sti, Tshul khrims mthar phyin left his handprint in solid rock, which not only mirrors the actions of Mi la ras pa at the original La phyi and of his guru Karma nor bu, but also those of another contemporary revivalist-yogin and one more of his preceptors, mKhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs.⁷⁷² Tshul khrims mthar phyin commented, “the rock does not change, but your abilities change.”

⁷⁶⁸ Tib. *ro snyom*, which is a concept especially related to the Mahāmudrā transmission. See Roberts 2007: 12, 2, 133.

⁷⁶⁹ *ci byung ro snyoms kyi dka' spyad dang rnying rus drag pos nyams len la thang lhod med par brtson 'grus chu bo'i rgyun bzhin du brtsams par mdzad pa [...]* 'di lta bu rnal 'byor pa'i mdzad spyod/ (Karma stobs rgyal, n.d. n. pag.).

⁷⁷⁰ *gTum mo* as is also a transformation of carnal desires and worldly wishes.

⁷⁷¹ The ultimate collapse of the illusion of duality is enlightenment, but the steps of accomplishment from liberation to enlightenment contain the different levels of this realization.

⁷⁷² Huber 1997 a: 338 and Karma stobs rgyal 1999: 45. Compare the rescucitation of *gnas* performed by mKhan po 'Jigs phun and described by Germano (1998: 72) – for instance, mKhan po 'Jigs phun's methods of ritual re-activation through leaving footprints is similar to the agency of Tshul khrims mthar phyin.

In order to mark these special abilities that distinguish him from the ordinary people, the *gtum mo* expert is traditionally rewarded with a white robe, so unique and striking in the natural scenery or among the red robes of other monks and nuns. By presenting Tshul khrims mthar phyin with the white robe, gSal 'byed Rin po che officially recognized him as his *shamanic* counterpart in the authority to reconstruct the disintegrated ritual network at sKyo brag.

This is how the construction of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's personal narrative occurred hand in hand with the re-mandalization of Chab sti – its historical reputation as a site for epic ritual deeds and the mysterious allure of the remote *gnas* helped Tshul khrims mthar phyin to emerge from his solitary life in the mountains as “The Third Mi la ras pa.” For those who remembered the narratives that had once defined this area and made it sacred, his very presence there proved that they were still relevant, regardless of all that happened, and should be reinstalled to their previous position of role models for new narratives.

Since re-mandalization seems to be more of a complex, dynamic process than a solitary act, Tshul khrims mthar phyin did not come to a halt there. He continued to establish a hermitage where its outer, inner and hidden structure reflected traditional models of a ritual territory – he created La phyi *sgom grwa*.

In the following sections, I comment on the topographic outline of the hermitage to point out that two different models of ritual arrangement of space were used. The first one reflects the *maṇḍala* principle (*dkyil 'khor*), and the second is an ascending structure, which corresponds to the Tibetan mythos of a holy mountain (*gnas ri*) or perhaps even a Buddhist *stūpa*.⁷⁷³ Through the application of these traditional models, Tshul khrims mthar phyin continues to reinvest Chab sti and sKyo brag with the cosmological value that it had been denied. The return of the pre-modern Tibetan Buddhist universe re-contextualizes Chab sti and sKyo brag within the power-network of the *gnas* of old Kham, which is crucial to re-endowing landscape with ritual significance.⁷⁷⁴

What is more, techniques of shaping the landscape also help reconstruct the traditional social structure. They empower the La phyi community and their associates (such as families and sponsors) to create their own sanctuary permeated with traditional local narratives, which form paradigms for the narratives of their own lives. This way of regaining a sense of control

⁷⁷³ *gNas ri*= often translated as “mountain abode,” since they describe an abode of a Tantric deity (*lha*), which inhabits the upper echelons of a mountain. See Blondeau & Steinkellner 1996.

⁷⁷⁴ Compare Gardner 2007: 4.

over their fate is an effective indigenous strategy against the collective “identity crisis” and the instrumentalization of minorities by the state.

IX.3.2. La phyi as *maṇḍala* and holy mountain

Two traditional models of ritual arrangement of space are simultaneously applied at La phyi. They permeate one another to form a multidimensional structure that counteracts the cosmologically flat landscape of Juella Xiang. The *maṇḍala* model is rooted in the historical status of Chab sti as *gnas* and also in its development as a hermitage centered around the master Tshul khriṃs mthar phyin. As for the hierarchically ascending pyramid-like structure, resembling *gnas ri*, it reflects the didactic purpose of a meditation school.

Such overlapping of ritual territories was a common phenomenon before the Chinese communists first arrived here. In the chapter describing the past of this area, I explained how the different *maṇḍala*-layouts projected on this area competed and overlapped, a tradition reinvigorated in the recent years at Chab sti when the place became an arena for the visions of another modern, local saint Ye shes Rab rgyas who envisaged this venue to be a Saṃvara-cult site similar to the original La phyi.⁷⁷⁵

Today, in the post-Mao setting, such layering of ritual territories seems to be a technique for a local concentration of power aiming at counteracting the power of the state. For this purpose, Tshul khriṃs mthar phyin and his accomplices brought together the authority of the past of the venue and the interdependent, traditional social constitution to resurrect old sKyo brag in its role of source of traditional identity.

With respect to the concentric *maṇḍala* paradigm represented at La phyi: even if Tshul khriṃs mthar phyin’s disciples do not settle around him in a literal sense, the very founding of the hermitage followed the traditional *maṇḍala* principle where a charismatic guru attracts disciples who come to live with him and from that moment, their whole lives revolve around him.⁷⁷⁶

The presence of an accomplished teacher symbolizes the central idea of Tantric training – enlightenment itself. The guru is also the living core of the *gnas* – he re-defines it, rules it and channels its *byin rlabs*. Thus, the establishing of the La phyi hermitage can be understood in terms of creating a *maṇḍala*, the appearance of which exerts an influence on the non-initiate community nearby. This local circle of power and to some extent, autonomy, is additionally meant to counteract the power construct of the state, the People’s Republic of China.

⁷⁷⁵ Huber 1997 a: 242, 250-273.

⁷⁷⁶ This will be discussed in the sections of the current chapter which describe the La phyi community.

In a way, the impact of La phyi is similar to that of a *dgon pa*. However, as opposed to the monastery, the focus at a hermitage is on inner development. sKyo brag monks still take active roles in the social life, e.g. by performing rituals in private homes at sKyo brag and Shar mda'. Even if La phyi allows for a degree of accessibility, and even if the hermitage can perform a number of social services like offering counsel, ritual service and opening a "field of merit," its influence over the community is distinctly different from that of the monastery below. Since the functioning of the meditation school as a *maṇḍala* that instigates change in the post-Mao society of sKyo brag and beyond will be discussed in Chapter Twelve under the issues of renunciation and millenarianism, these sections will be dedicated to an investigation of how the consciously planned topography of the La phyi hermitage reflects the re-mandalization of the landscape at sKyo brag.

Returning to the ascending *gnas ri* model, the existence of the two levels at La phyi (Level 0 for beginners and Level I for advanced practice) is obviously linked to the pragmatic intention to ensure greater remoteness from domestic economy and human habitation, as these are necessary conditions for the performance of more sophisticated forms of meditation. The hermitic lore even differentiates between names for retreat sites according to the degree of privacy they offer, as illustrated in Kong sprul's establishment of his *yang khrod* at Tsā 'dra.⁷⁷⁷ A modern example of a Bon po hermitage in the sDe dge area also shows that its founders distinguished between *ri khrod gong ma* and the lower *ri khrod zhol ma*.⁷⁷⁸

Tshul khrims mthar phyin explicitly mentioned that he understands Level I as a proper place for bestowing meditation instruction, in contrast to the Level 0 being "public space" (*sa mdo 'gag*). This is easily understood when one observes Level 0 bustling with life during the meditation session breaks: the nuns fetching water and yak dung, children from the alphabet class running around, goats and other animals wandering about, families visiting with their yaks, and the workers busy with construction.

The division into ascending levels also mirrors a traditional model of hierarchy in Tibetan societies, where the ones who renounce the most and develop the most experience and skill in the Tantric arts are also empowered to rise to the highest echelons of society. In the pre-modern time, the ordained were more privileged as the laity, and *shamanic* masters like

⁷⁷⁷ *Yang khrod* as opposed to *ri khrod*, which lay lower and thus closer to the monastery of dPal spungs. Tsā 'dra appeared as more independent from the nearby monastery. See Chapter Two in this work and Schuh 1976: xlv.

⁷⁷⁸ Tsering Thar 2002: 156.

hermits who were independent of all social institutions, including religious ones, were traditionally seen as the crown of Tibetan civilization.⁷⁷⁹

It is around this axis of hierarchy that many social networks have evolved, sustaining the perpetration of hermitic culture. Local people were especially attracted to the summits of a local mountain or a remote meditation cave, expecting to find the Tantric expert worthy of attention, trust and material support. While seeking out a specialist, they were drawn by the three types of motivation explained previously – creating merit for the sake of future existences, orientation toward pragmatic goals set by daily life, and the *bodhi* incentive to achieve liberation and enlightenment “in this body and life.” By social agreement, expert-hermits were able to fulfill these expectations as “fields of merit,” as local *shamans* and finally, as Tantric gurus. In return they would receive provisions for their retreat, high social standing and donations for their religious activities, when they decided to end their phase of isolation.⁷⁸⁰

At La phyi, the main “field of merit,” the potent magician and the expert Vajrayāna-preceptor is indisputably Tshul khriims mthar phyin. To emphasize this, his dwellings as well as practice caves are the uppermost points in the landscape of the hermitage and Tshul khriims mthar phyin insists that this is his natural place to be and to teach. Therefore, to get in contact with the master, people have to climb the slope up above the plain of Level 0. Their visits can be categorized according to the motivation.

One of the merit-makers I witnessed was Srung ma, a middle-aged Khams pa who works for the local government. He sponsors the construction of a road from the clinic-hut up to Level I, so that the then 62-year old master could travel easily (at present he has to go down to what is almost Level 0 to be transported by jeep). Tshul khriims mthar phyin’s physical condition has always been quite robust; he seems healthy, but the possibility of transport will prove useful for the future.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁹ Compare for instance Crook & Low (1997: 297-315) who describe the example of the female master Ma gcig Lab sgron, founder of the gCod lineage. Her life is an example of an evolution through the different religious roles of apparently increasing ritual and social value, from a village lama to scholar and further from a celibate nun to the final stage of a solitary hermitess who inhabited remote caves high above the line of human habitation. It was this last phase that ensured her enlightenment and won her the respect of the local community as well as of other experts. For a discussion on the hierarchy and logic of renunciation also see Mills 2003: 69-81. For the solitary hermit as embodiment of the ideal monk, see Goldstein & Tsarong 1985: 28.

⁷⁸⁰ See below for sections that discuss renunciation and the paradox of the seemingly passive hermit, who still accepts the social roles of a teacher and the virtuous magician for the local laity.

⁷⁸¹ I would like to again emphasize that the categories of religious motivation (according to Samuel 1993 and based on Spiro 1982) that I am using throughout this work do not concern persons (even if illustrated with examples of specific individuals), rather impulses present in their distinct actions.

As the chief *shaman* for sKyo brag, Tshul khrim mthar phyin admits having left a hand print on the rock wall, like Mi la ras pa left his footprint at the original La phyi.⁷⁸² Visitors at Level I do not miss the chance to collect blessing-power (*byin rlabs*) from this miraculous impression by touching their heads or hands against it. In his role of a *shaman*, Tshul khrim mthar phyin is also frequently asked for divinations (*mo*), which he performs by using his *mālā* (*'phreng ba*). I also witnessed him being asked for a small piece of his white robe to be used as an amulet against smoking, which he graciously gave the visitor.⁷⁸³

Finally, Tshul khrim mthar phyin's position as Tantric guru is emphasized at Level I, as it is exclusively here that he gives the Mahāmudrā-*gdams ngag* or instructions in the Six Yogas. In contrast to this, the Vinaya vows are given freely at any spot on the premises of the hermitage and preferably, on Level 0, which also emphasizes the symbolic order of vows (*sdom pa*).

The mythical Golden Cave lies at an even more elevated spot, towering over the entire area. It is reminiscent of sKyo brag chos rje, and other great local masters of the past, who accessed this remote place by the power of flight. This spot will also remind the more informed visitor of the cave where sGam po pa, revered as the guru of the 'Ba' rom founder Dar ma dBang phyug, lived high above his monastery.

For the contemporary pilgrim, the Golden Cave represents the time when Tshul khrim mthar phyin renounced his village *dpon po*-post and came to live here like Mi la ras pa. Although he grew up under communism and foreign domination, he was able to prove that traditional narratives are still valid. This occurred when he achieved perfect control over his body and mind and could transfer the sign of his victory onto the rock wall of Chab sti in form of a handprint.

Most ascetic traditions exhibit cosmological tendencies, but the conscious design of the La phyi complex as a cosmic mountain additionally reflects the didactic goal of the site as a training place for hermits.⁷⁸⁴ In this way, the original cosmological content of Chab sti as a Vajrasattva-*maṇḍala* is enhanced with more levels of meaning, flowing from the pyramid-like structure of the meditation school.

Similar to the Phūtōk hermitage in Thailand, as described by Tambiah, the spatial arrangement at La phyi is also a representation of the spiritual journey of the meditator.⁷⁸⁵ On

⁷⁸² Huber 1997 b: 256.

⁷⁸³ Compare Tambiah (1988) and his analysis of the cult of amulets granted by holy hermits in Thailand.

⁷⁸⁴ Flood 2004, Valantasis 1995, Tambiah 1998.

⁷⁸⁵ See Tambiah 1998: 274-289.

the plain at the foot of the Chab sti mountain, people first come to renounce this world and acquire basic training, while still supported by co-practitioners and family. The grassland is already elevated above the village to emphasize the moment of the original conversion, and further ascension represents the levels of renunciation as a metaphor for the levels of disassociation from society. As the meditators develop their skills in practice, they ascend higher, where they dwell at an isolated area and perfect their training on a more advanced level. At Level I, they are close to their master, who resides even higher – in the caves close to the summit. What is more, the master once roamed this wilderness on his own, eating alpine plants like *Mi la ras pa*. Today, in complete control of his mental and physical realities, he embodies the Tantric ideal of yogic attainment and is referred to as “the *grub thob*” (Skt. *siddha*). This is why the guru occupies the most elevated spot at the hermitage.

The physical summit of Chab sti represents the goal of the Vajrayāna path. Its gradual accomplishment through an upward climb imitates the existential and moral ascent of a Buddhist practitioner: moving up from the lower realms of existence (*ngan song*) into higher, more favorable ones, until one is able to transcend the necessity of rebirth; the gradual purification (*sbyong*) of negative actions and obscurations (*sdig sgrib*); the ranking of the Buddhist *yānas*, from Hinayāna as the “lowest,” through Mahāyāna to Tantra as the pinnacle of teachings. Going up from Level 0 to Level I, a hermit or pilgrim is reminded of the hierarchy of vows, where a sacred oath concerning the yogic view (*lta ba*) is considered more important than the basic rules of the Vinaya. The physical ascension corresponds to rising from materialism to spirituality: climbing the consecutive *bodhisattva-bhūmi*; the hierarchy of the lineage, where the consecutive gurus are always depicted above the heads of disciples; the yogic training of the mind-body complex, where the movement of energy winds (*rlung*) in the upward direction is considered a secret sign of success; and finally, the physical, mental and metaphorical approximation (*bsnyen sgrub*) to the ideal of the *yi dam* deity embodied in Tshul khri ms mthar phyin as the guru. Through the emulation of his ascetic lifestyle, the practitioner’s efforts are crowned with full consummation of his or her capacities.

The role of the guru in the development of a disciple as central to the Tantric tradition has thoroughly been discussed elsewhere. In the following sections, I would like to accentuate the special role of mountain summits and remote caves in the collective imagination of Tibetans.⁷⁸⁶ These were often associated with the presence of expert-hermits, who were attributed with magical abilities. In particular, it is the yogic attainment of flying (*mkha’*

⁷⁸⁶ See for instance Wayman 1997: 205-221.

la'phur ba'i dngos grub) that inspired numerous narratives and has become a popular theme in Tibetan art. It is said that most Buddhist *siddhas*, including Śākyamuni himself, were believed to have mastered this skill.⁷⁸⁷ However, since the time of Mi la ras pa, whose life story contains many accounts of miraculous air travel, flying has frequently been associated with the perfection of Inner Heat.⁷⁸⁸

Although this and similar accomplishments (*siddhi*) are secondary to the main goal of enlightenment, in the Buddhist Tantras, the accomplishment of flying is a result of the complete control of the *prāṇa*-winds within the body.⁷⁸⁹ Beginning with Mi la ras pa, representatives of his lineage like the 1st Karma pa Dus gsum mKhyen pa (1110–1193), his *ras pa*-colleague gSal stong sho sgom or Mi la's emanation Zhabs dkar ba were all extolled for their ability to take to the air.⁷⁹⁰

What is more, as mentioned in the historical section of this work, sKyo brag is particularly proud of yogins like Chos rje, who was famed for reaching the elevated caves of Chab sti, Seng ge rdzong or Nyi zla phug by the magical powers of flight. As expressed by the contemporary local lama and poet sKu rgyal (b.1935):

In the supreme power place of Khams, sKyo brag Chos 'khor gling

[Exists] the oral tradition of flying yogins [and] the dharma [of their] pith
instructions [...]⁷⁹¹

I have reported on the life of Mahāsiddha Karma nor bu, the main master to both Tshul khriims mthar phyin and gSal byed and an important icon for the contemporary revival also beyond sKyo brag. As expected, “The Second Mi la ras pa” was also believed to have the capacity to fly. One of his biographies claims:

Far [like] wings he stretched out the [sleeves of his] white cotton robe of the blissful heat of *caṇḍālī* which blazed from within [him], and he soared in the

⁷⁸⁷ See Mullin 2006.

⁷⁸⁸ Compare also Eliade (1969: 326-40) and his idea of Buddhist flying saints.

⁷⁸⁹ Generally speaking, the special powers or *dngos sgrub* are the result of stable *śamatha* (*zhi gnas*), but in the Tantric context they are often explained in terms of the energy body. See Yeshe Gyamtso 2006: 61-63. Some authors like Mullin (2006: 40-44) especially contextualize the magical ability of flying within the “ten powers [of a Buddha/*bodhisattva*]” (*stobs bcu*) as the power of transformation (*rnam par 'phrul pa*). Mullin also connects flying with one of the Six Yogas, but he does so by linking it with the yoga of The Illusory Body (*sgyu lus*).

⁷⁹⁰ Yeshe Gyamtso 2006: 60-63; Zhabs dkar, et al. 2001: 308.

⁷⁹¹ *khams kyi (sic!) gnas mchog skyo brag chos 'khor gling// 'phur shas can gyi bka' srol man ngag chos//* (sKu rgyal 1982: 3).

lucid, clear sky in an unobstructed manner; [this second] Mi la was victorious, an untamed white vulture.⁷⁹²

The tales surrounding the magical abilities of Tshul khrim mthar phyin also occasionally mention flying. Although the master himself dismisses this as gossip, he admits that “people say that he left a handprint in stone,” and had me verify this with the main witness, the three-year retreat-attendant.⁷⁹³ He moreover urged us to come in winter to the top of the mountain and watch him melt snow.

These wonders remind one of Karma nor bu or Mi la ras pa himself; it is also no coincidence that Tshul khrim mthar phyin’s handprint is displayed on Level I, at the summit of Chab sti *gnas*. The majority of my informants about the person of Tshul khrim mthar phyin admitted that to them, his most impressive feats pertain to his ability to control nature, which occurred in the caves situated at the top of the Chab sti brag dkar site. Because many documented cases on the leaders of the modern revival involve supernatural abilities, I believe that this topos has been reinvigorated in order to prove the effectiveness and validity of Tibetan Buddhist culture after its annihilation. What is more, its reproduction is necessary for popularizing hermitism in its other aspects: as moral or ritual training. In this way, the acme of the La phyi hermitage serves as a location where a re-connection with the lineage is possible and also represents the recent emergence of Tshul khrim mthar phyin as local saint. As such, restating the traditional topos of the mountain peak emphasizes the ultimate guarantee for success of modern projects like La phyi which draw attention to and provide a scene for the possibility of accomplishment also today.

IX.4. The daily life – customs, rules and exceptions

Generally speaking, La phyi follows the liberal open-door policy known from gSer rta bla rung sgar;⁷⁹⁴ i.e. people are accepted regardless of their sectarian background, lay or ordained status, origin, age, ethnicity⁷⁹⁵ or gender.⁷⁹⁶ Moreover, the inhabitants/members are allowed to stay as long as they wish. For many, the flexible duration is the primary factor that makes

⁷⁹² *tsanḍa’i bde drod khong nas ’bar ba’i ras dkar gshog pa ring brkyang bas/ ’od gsal mkha’ la thogs med lding ba mi la thang dkar rgod po rgyal/* (Karma stobs rgyal 1999: 3).

⁷⁹³ For a report on this miracle in the words of the *sgrub g.yog*, see above in Tshul khrim mthar phyin’s life story.

⁷⁹⁴ See Germano 1998, also compare Tambiah 1988: 150.

⁷⁹⁵ I claim this because Tshul khrim mthar phyin has several Han disciples and was quite keen on placing me into one of the three-year enclosures.

⁷⁹⁶ However, since La phyi is principally a nunnery, males are accepted for longer-term training only under special conditions – if they are candidates for the three-year retreat, there must be space for them in the *sgrub khang*.

their retreat feasible at all since it gives them the possibility to leave for a few weeks during the caterpillar fungus season in June-July and finance their education.

Newcomers are accepted at all times and there are no intake periods. They are expected to take monastic ordination from Tshul khrim mthar phyin as soon as possible and, if they come for a prolonged stay, eventually build a cabin of their own unless they are close relatives of any La phyi nuns, in which case they are allowed to share their cabin.⁷⁹⁷ There were 30 new members by October 2008 alone.

The planning of the sites for new huts involves the manager or Tshul khrim mthar phyin himself, who is a practical man and enjoys this task. I once witnessed Tshul khrim mthar phyin instructing a father of a future retreatant:

It's a retreat hut, not a shop. Be sure not to make it too large.⁷⁹⁸

The new members of the community are to acquire the funding for the cabin on their own and organize its construction (usually carried out with the help of their family members).

Construction work on the *sgrub khangs* involves the entire community, not only the families of future trainees but also all La phyi nuns.⁷⁹⁹ The nuns go up the mountain side and collect clay and stones, which are then brought down onto two heaps located at Level 0. They then proceed to crush the stones and make bricks by filling brick-forms with clay. Sometimes they go down to the village to fetch wooden logs.⁸⁰⁰ All buildings here are mostly made of locally accessible material; only the wood is brought from elsewhere.

However free the retreatants are to come and go, they are expected to follow the regulations (*bca' khrim*s) devised by 'Jigs med grags pa and approved by Tshul khrim mthar phyin. The rules concern the variety of different occupants and their visitors, governing the life of the site and at the same time, defining the territory of the hermitage. In fact, one of the terms used to describe retreat (*mtshams*) at the same time designates a boundary, which is why border lines are just as important for the inhabitants as for the people outside.⁸⁰¹

The general context of the principles of the hermitage has to do with the Vinaya code, so the most important regulation at the La phyi hermitage concerns the separation of nuns from monks or male visitors in order to avoid breaches of celibacy. The general rule, prohibiting males to stay on the premises overnight is adjusted to accommodate Tshul khrim mthar

⁷⁹⁷ For the costs, see below.

⁷⁹⁸ For the special features of a retreat hut, compare Rab gsal zla ba, et al. 2008: 10-11.

⁷⁹⁹ Because of this, some of the rules have been adapted. See below in this work.

⁸⁰⁰ I have seen nuns engaged in construction work at their *ri khrod* in many other places in Khams.

⁸⁰¹ Compare Huber 2006: 2.

phyin's special guests like his son or other male instructors, who sleep in the "family cabin" at Level 0 or at Level I, in one of the free huts. The 8 monks in the upper *sgrub khang* pose no threat of a potential breach of celibacy, since they live in a sealed enclosure. As for the 15 construction workers, they were given an especially designated area to pitch their tent and they are forbidden to leave it during the night.

Another rule, which is consequently and systematically enforced, pertains to keeping the meditation session (*thun*) schedule. The bKa' brgyud school calls for four sessions a day and at this hermitage, they are organized as follows:

5 a.m. – 8 a.m.

9 a.m. – 12 a.m.

3 p.m. – 6 p.m.

8.30 p.m. – 11 p.m.

The additional session of a group ritual (*gsol ka*) takes place every day and involves chanting and playing instruments to summon and petition lineage gurus and *dharmapālas*. Taking part is optional; it begins at 6 p.m. The *gsol ka* is announced by a gong sounded from the *lha khang*, which is also the venue for the ritual. All other sessions are announced by the penetrating sound of a conch shell (*dung*), carried around Level 0 in a kind of a small procession. Especially at 5 a.m., the nun-in-charge⁸⁰² will then peak into the windows and make sure everyone is awake and practicing. Nuns take weekly turns to form these "discipline squads."

The sessions are filled with personal practice, depending on one's individual progress, determined by Tshul khrims mthar phyin. The practice is to be carried out in one's cabin.⁸⁰³ During the sessions, meditators are expected to stay in and apply themselves to the training; they are not to leave their hut even to answer to their physiological needs.⁸⁰⁴ Wandering around, including visiting other cabins during a session is penalized with a 5 RMB fine. For the meditation periods, the hermitage looks like it is almost an uninhabited place.

If a nun has received an exceptional pardon to visit her family down in the village for a day (and parents are the only ones who are authorized to call a retreatant home), she is expected to

⁸⁰² The La phyi community will be introduced as follows.

⁸⁰³ For the curriculum, see Chapter Eleven in this work.

⁸⁰⁴ This is quite common also in other *ri khrod* in Khams. Some other hermitages are even more strict – retreatants are trained like special squad-soldiers to relieve themselves only at designated times.

return before nightfall. Failure to adhere to this rule is fined by a 50 RMB penalty and 500 prostrations (*phyag 'tshal ba*).

The permission to leave the meditation school for a longer time to help one's family during the harvest in the *dbyar rtswa dgun bu* collection or another seasonal activity – varying from several days to a few weeks – is always granted, since most nuns depend on the income their relatives raise during this period. This is one of the reasons for the fluctuating number of people at La phyi.

There are two additional precepts designed by 'Jigs med grags pa. The first one determines the dress code, which is not surprising since in the many Khams pa monasteries I have seen, the principles concerning the appearance of monks and nuns are often adjusted to incorporate additional pieces of clothing, fancy fabrics or headgear, etc. At La phyi, every nun is expected to wear a set of identical, plain robes; no extra jackets or hats are allowed. This regulation was only set aside for the time the nuns were expected to help in the construction of the *sgrub khangs*. On this occasion, they could wear additional aprons or sun hats.

The other precept deals with something as subtle as spiritual progress. All retreatants here, except for the ones in three-year retreat, should see Tshul khrims mthar phyin every two to three days so that the master can check their diligence and their understanding of the current practice. If they are unable to answer the master's questions during three consecutive interviews, they are not directly penalized but observed in their capacity to keep up with the lifestyle and curriculum of the meditation school.⁸⁰⁵ Nonetheless, since no-one has been expelled yet, this rule functions purely as a discipline support.⁸⁰⁶

There is a special requirement for uniting the phases of sleep and meditation. No one, not even a beginner is allowed to possess a bed (this rule does not apply to absolute beginners and the senior sister of Tshul khrims mthar phyin).⁸⁰⁷ Everyone sleeps and meditates in “meditation boxes” (*sgom khri*) – slightly elevated, wooden armchair-like seats with a padded bottom, which can be closed from the front with an extra board. As ascetic as this may sound,

⁸⁰⁵ Compare Compare Goldstein & Tsarong 1985: 16.

⁸⁰⁶ My investigation has shown that not all nuns were familiar with some of the minor principles for the life in the *sgom grwa*. For instance, the 25-year old Shes rab lha mo from the cabin next to mine told me that she does not own a radio, since it is not allowed, but the discipline master 'Jigs med grags pa told me that it actually was permitted.

⁸⁰⁷ Newcomer nuns are first taught proper meditation posture in a series of classes.

meditation boxes are actually very comfortable – and they should be since many hermits spend most of their lives in them.⁸⁰⁸

As expressed by 'Jigs med grags pa, using a meditation box is supposed to be a reminder of the Buddhist discipline in the face of death and impermanence as well as a way to follow the guru:

If you happen to die while sleeping in a bed, it will be more difficult for you to remain conscious.⁸⁰⁹ In this way, one also has more time for *dharmā*, and less for sleep. Besides, some disciples of our lama swear that he can do without sleep for three months! When he asked them to sleep in a box, they agreed, though they did not know if they could become like him.

In autumn, there is an uninterrupted, seven-day and seven-night ritual at Khang ne monastery. The lama joins in and does not sleep. A real *siddha* can control the five poisons,⁸¹⁰ including sloth.⁸¹¹

Food is an individual issue, but it can also be shared. On the one hand, all retreatants are expected to take care of their own supplies, which are either provided by relatives or acquired by their own efforts; on the other, Tshul khriims mthar phyin or gSal byed sporadically support the nuns with gifts such as sacks of rice.⁸¹² At lunchtime (12 a.m. - 3 p.m.) most huts organize themselves into cooking teams, but there is no real pattern for this – at times one hut of three nuns would collect their supplies and cook for themselves; at other times two cabins will cooperate. Many nuns cover their own needs.⁸¹³ This varies since the number of retreatants present at the site constantly fluctuates.

Additionally, some nuns may go on a complete or a semi-fast (one vegetarian meal a day); that usually depends on the practice they are doing. The complete fasts are usually combined with the *smiyung gnas- sādhanā* on the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara. The fasting periods are arranged irregularly and could also be individual.

⁸⁰⁸ Prior to seeing the meditation boxes at La phyi, I had already witnessed their frequent use in other meditation schools across Khams. I was told that rNying ma pa practitioners may receive additional instructions as to maintaining their awareness during sleep.

⁸⁰⁹ This refers to the clarity the meditator should maintain throughout the death process in order to recognize it as a chance for highest spiritual attainment.

⁸¹⁰ For the five poisons (*dug lnga*) see the Secret Life chapter of the current work.

⁸¹¹ Compare the daily life and rules of another open door hermitage of the Theravāda tradition in Thailand described by Tambiah (1988:144-150). Especially the regulation to sleep in the *sgom khri* resembles one of the ascetic practices (Pali: *dhutaṅga*) as prescribed in the *Milindapañha* – that of *nesajjika* (“the sitting man’s practice”) or renunciation of sleeping in a lying position. *Dhutaṅgas* are commonly applied by the Thai ascetic Forest Monk tradition. Also see Flood 2004: 130-133 and compare the description of this rule at Ge chags retreat centers – see Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 160-161.

⁸¹² The *sgrub khang* nuns follow other food regulations. See below.

⁸¹³ Compare Tulku Urgyen on Ge chags nuns in retreat, Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 159.

The meals are simple: *tsam pa*, rice, dried meat or cheese, vegetables like cabbage or radish, an occasional piece of yak meat or pork or *thug pa*, a thick Tibetan soup with square noodles. Several nuns keep additional supplies like candy or cookies, but unlike in other *ri khrod* I have visited, there is no shop on the La phyi premises, so they do not have easy access to sweets or snacks like packaged, dried Chinese noodle-soup, popular across Khams.⁸¹⁴

As for fuel, dried yak dung is used for the main fire, ignited with the help of a few twigs of juniper, which are so rare and precious in this woodless region. The nuns store their wood in small open cells built next to the stairs of their cabins. The yak dung is stored inside the hut, as it has to remain perfectly dry. Both juniper and dung are collected in bigger groups; the nuns leave the premises equipped with large sacks to go to pastures and look for dried droppings.

There are also additional chores to be carried out in groups, e.g. when a truck filled with supplies gets stuck in snow, the whole *sgom grwa* is called to help.

Very few retreatants own a solar panel that enables them to power an electric bulb; many rely on candles and others on a self-made set consisting of a car battery connected to a light bulb or on the faint light from their kitchen stove.

IX.5. Financial costs of joining the hermitage

Nearly all of practitioners at La phyi are sustained by their families, who in turn largely profit from the *dbyar rtswa dgun bu* collection.⁸¹⁵ There are also donations that Tshul khrims mthar phyin and gSal byed use to support them. Especially the nuns, who are about to start the three-year retreat in the sealed *sgrub khang* will rely on the contribution made by A bstan phun tshogs, the third of the sKyo brag revivalist triad. He is willing to provide 60-70 RMB per individual in a month, which should cover their two meals a day.

The newcomers are expected to build their own hut as soon as possible, but not necessarily prior to settling here.⁸¹⁶ The cost of construction, including the materials is 200,000 RMB; most of this sum is used to pay for transportation, which is quite expensive in these areas. The work is usually carried out by the prospective nun's family, so except for food costs for the workers, it does not involve many extra charges.

⁸¹⁴ The shop building is unfinished and used as store-room for rice sacks, etc.

⁸¹⁵ "In 2007, the very best quality had a retail price in coastal Chinese cities of more than 240,000 Yuan per kg (£16,300; \$32,000; €24,000), making it more expensive than gold." ("Yartsa gunbu: Tibet's underground cash cow" at <http://www.tibetinfonet.net/content/update/98>, accessed 10.04.2010).

⁸¹⁶ The new nuns who do not have their own hut are temporarily accommodated with others in their cabins. There are also women who are allowed to permanently share a hut, but they are usually related.

The plain monastic robe costs 250 RMB. The expenditure for one individual per month amounts to 100 RMB and does not include extra facilities like solar panels; a middle-sized solar battery (68 x 43cm) is priced at 1,150 RMB.

IX.6. The community

To a certain extent, the varied community living at La phyi has been introduced in the subchapters above. This section will be devoted to enumerating all of its members in order to portray their relationships, agencies and various perspectives.⁸¹⁷ These differing positions are all unified around the person of the guru, referred to as *bla rgan*, which in the Nang chen dialect is a simple, but honorific designation.⁸¹⁸ Since his person and agency was introduced already, I will omit it in the sections below.

Devotion (*mos gus*) to the guru is a necessary requirement for settling at La phyi, which is typical of a bKa' brgyud center. To explain devotion, Tshul khrims mthar phyin gives the classical example of Tilo pa and his disciple Nāro pa:

In order to set his mind free of rigid conceptualization, the teacher exposed him to many painful trials. When Tilo pa began each of his biddings, he would say: "If I had a good student..." Each time, Nāro pa listened without hesitation, even if it meant suffering for him.

In the same way, devotion is the unifying principle for the La phyi community, which is arranged both hierarchically and concentrically, as explained using the *maṇḍala* and the holy mountain models.

I have mentioned the manager-monk (*gnyer pa*) 'Jigs med grags pa and his major influence over the life at the hermitage, but essentially, the second highest authority here is Tshul khrims mthar phyin's 33-year-old son, Tshul khrims bdud 'dul. He is himself an experienced yogin, gives teachings and is involved in decision-making. In 2007, he was the only person in position to persuade his father to grant an audience to me and my initial travel companions.

When Tshul khrims mthar phyin came to Chab sti in the late 1990s, he began accepting disciples. The spread of his influence occurred in line with a certain scheme, which I compared to the dispersion of a spherical wave. First, it was his relatives, who became convinced of his transformation. Then it was the neighbors, then people from the nearby villages; and so his fame spread further and further. Today, representatives of all of these phases or spheres of distribution can be found at La phyi.

⁸¹⁷ The critical analysis of La phyi as a form of social life is the subject of the current sections; the topic is addressed in Chapter Twelve of this work. Compare also Goldstein & Tsarong 1985.

⁸¹⁸ Compare Karma phrin las (1965) where the ruling king is always referred to as *rgyal rgan*.

Even if the community of La phyi is hierarchically divided according to individual status in religious hierarchy, and allocated to Level 0 or Level I in a way that corresponds with their rank, many of La phyi's members commute between the levels; moreover, some are accommodated on Level 0 or Level I for pragmatic reasons. This makes the community much more flexible.

Two of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's own daughters, Kar dpal mo and 'Phrin las dpal mo are nuns at Level 0; one began her three-year retreat in the new *sgrub khang* in November 2008. In spite of being the master's daughters, they are not privileged in any way, especially since at La phyi, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's lay past is a forbidden topic of conversation. All guru's children present there are only mentioned by their names or, in case of Tshul khrims bdud 'dul, with his lama-title; their kinship to Tshul khrims mthar phyin is generally avoided or dismissed.

The two members of the hermitage's community who were the most determined to present Tshul khrims mthar phyin as a long-time monk with no lay life experience (such as marriage and parenting) were the guru's own brother, Tshul khrims rnam rgyal (b. 1953) and his sister sGrol ma (b.1943). The brother of the *ras pa* occupies the "family hut," one of the lowest at Level 0, along with another sister, the 54-year-old laywoman Tshe ring and their old mother, who hardly gets out of bed. Tshul khrims rnam rgyal has a special status between a self-appointed caretaker and a liberally treated guest. He came here "to do his *mañi*" and helps the nuns collect yak dung. Tshul khrims rnam rgyal astonished me one day when he came back from a short trip down to the monastery, ordained as novice (*dge tshul*) – with his hair shorn and a red robe on.⁸¹⁹

There is a satellite telephone connection with La phyi, and Tshul khrims rnam rgyal likes to be responsible for the "office hours" (8.00-9.00 a.m. and 5.00-6.00 p.m.). In case of phone calls, he treks between Level 0 and Level I to look for his brother the guru or the manager. The telephone number of the *sgom grwa* is available at the monastery and in the monastic "charity-discount shop" in the village, but it is mostly used by sponsors and officials who wish to visit the master.

The La phyi manager also takes advantage of the telephone connection, which assists him in organizing his chores.

For the past eight years, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's older, ordained sister sGrol ma belonged to the gNas mdo convent, where her *ras pa*-brother had been caretaker. She says she

⁸¹⁹ He must have taken his vows with gSal byed and it is not clear to me why he did not ask his brother to impart the ordination.

came to La phyi because “there are many nuns meditating here” and she “can repeat her *mani*,” though quite obviously she was also motivated by the presence of so many of her close family members. sGrol ma lives alone in her own cabin, also one of the lowest ones.

As for the guru’s sister Tshe ring, she is here mainly in order to take care of their mother, but she admits that one of her daughters lives at the meditation school as a *dge ma* as well. Both Tshe ring and her daughter receive regular visits by Tshe ring’s son, who supplies them with food.

The manager’Jigs med grags pa has likewise inspired his family members to live at the meditation school. But even though the 69-year-old monk Tsha bo is his father, they do not occupy the same cabin.⁸²⁰ In 2007, when Tsha bo arrived at the hermitage, he went into closed retreat for three months, staying at one of the huts at Level I. He now occupies one of the beds in the workers’ tent by the construction of the lower *sgrub khang*, which he helped finance by selling family property. His two nieces are *dge ma* here.

While the first nuns who settled here had been ordained by gSal dga’ at the monastery below, the majority of women arrive to La phyi directly from their village and take their ordination on the spot. Most of the ones I interviewed come from a pastoral background with the basic income stemming from caterpillar fungus collection. It is their families who support them in retreat; in return they require their contribution to the work during the *dbyar rtswa dgun ’bu* harvest for a few weeks between June and July. During this time, they are allowed to leave the hermitage. They are not only local women; some come from as far as the Lha sa region, such as the 19-year-old Tshul khriims bzang mo, who resolved to come to Tshul khriims mthar phyin’s hermitage after she heard him teach in Lha sa in 2005. She is a kitchen assistant for the lama, and admits that it took her some time before she could grow accustomed to the local dialect.

The *dge ma* population is growing due to family connections, and frequently a young novice will inspire her sisters or cousins to join the hermitage. In this case, they occupy the same cabin.

The residents organize themselves into “discipline units” of 2-3 nuns. The units take turns to sound the conch shell at the beginning of each session. The *dge mas* cook, collect fuel and help with the *sgrub khang* construction in groups; as for the latter activity, each nun is expected to contribute three working days. From among them, the *gnyer pa* picked an assistant, the energetic, 20-year-old ’Phrin las chos sgron. She is the connecting link between

⁸²⁰ In fact, Tsha bo has not been a monk for long, and by taking the vows at an advanced age, he followed a popular model, according to which older Tibetans devote themselves to religion.

the highest authorities and the community of nuns. Her tasks involve communicating the decisions of authorities and helping with their application, e.g. arranging accommodations and meals for guests.

There are two other, more advanced groups present on Level I at La phyi: two male cotton-clad *ras pa* yogins and eight monks in three-year retreat. Although the *ras pa* students do not live here anymore, they are important “implicit community members,” since they give evidence that the training at La phyi brings the expected results “in this body and life.” Their abandoned, tiny stone booths of the most extreme degree of austerity located at Level I still bear witness to their achievement. These highly advanced disciples have been away in sealed retreat at Khang ne *sgon* since 2006, so most in the community never met them, though they take great pride in talking about them.⁸²¹ Tshul khriims mthar phyin explains that it took them 9 years of training under his guidance (a double three-year retreat and additional three years of personal training with the master). However, as the guru explained, they are still special, because

...although every bKa’ brgyud pa exercises the channels and the winds (*rtsa rlung*),⁸²² not everyone accomplishes it.

The ones who are currently learning the *rtsa rlung*, are the eight monks sealed in the *sgrub khang* for three years, three months, and three days. They are from sKye dgu mdo, rDza stod and sKyo brag. Since early 2007, when they began their retreat, they were to stay here without any contact with the outside world, except for the one ritually assigned person who tends to their daily needs and supplies certain substances required in the training.⁸²³

The elderly mother of one of the *sgrub khang* meditators occupies a small house that lies some 150 meters beneath the enclosure. Even more surprising in this context is the fact that she is currently staying here with an infant grandchild. Living with them temporarily is a new, 18-year-old nun, who helps in the lama-kitchen at Level I and is learning how to read and write.

⁸²¹ One of them, called dPal ldan chos skyong of Kha cham, started out at 13 as a monk at gNas mdo *dgon*, then became Tshul khriims mthar phyin’s disciple when the master came to give teachings on the Six Yogas to the *sgrub khang*, where dPal ldan chos skyong was training. He performed another 3-year retreat under the guidance of Tshul khriims mthar phyin, traveled with him to Ya chen, gSe rta and Wutanshan and stayed under the direct guidance of his guru at Chab sti *gnas*. At present, he is at Khang ne *dgon* in sealed, solitary retreat. Compare a similar retreat form, practiced at sKyo brag in the pre-modern era and described in Gendün Rinpoche (2011: 27-28).

⁸²² *rtsa rlung* denotes the general Thabs lam-methodology of employing subtle energy channels (Skt. *nāḍi*, Tib. *rtsa*) and winds (Skt. *vāyu*, Tib. *rlung*).

⁸²³ For the rules of the three-year retreat, see Chapter Two and below.

As the central figure for all La phyi meditators, Tshul khrims mthar phyin is additionally included among the ones permitted to enter the three-year enclosure in order to impart instructions.⁸²⁴ Nonetheless, the main meditation instructor (*sgrub dpon*) for the three-year retreatants is Shes rab Nyi ma, a young man in his late thirties, who is a close disciple of the master-*ras pa*. Shes rab Nyi ma also supports other *sgrub khangs* in the sKyo brag area. He is a rare guest on the premises. When he arrives at La phyi, he is mostly seen on Level I.

The formula of the three-year retreat requires the engagement of a committed caterer (*sgrub g.yog*). The attendant is a lay man in his late thirties, a disciple to Tshul khrims mthar phyin from a nearby village who arrived here to serve the retreatants on his guru's request. This was not a problem for his family: although he is married, he is not his wife's the only husband.⁸²⁵ The money for his provisions stems from trading caterpillar fungus. He says the lama is quite unique and that he understands that being here is also good for him. The *sgrub g.yog* is also an important witness to Tshul khrims mthar phyin's modern miracle of leaving a handprint in solid stone.⁸²⁶

The temporary residents in the retreat huts at Level I are two nuns from Ya chen *chos sgar* in Sichuan,⁸²⁷ who are waiting for the political climate to change, so that they can be allowed to travel back to their home institution; after the 2008 uprising, the Sichuan-Qinghai road within Khams was blocked for monks, nuns and tourists.⁸²⁸ The Ya chen nuns are in closed retreat and receive no special instructions from Tshul khrims mthar phyin.

There are 10 children living at Level 0, both boys and girls, aged from 7 to 13 years old. This group is clearly differentiated from the practitioner community, even though the oldest children are not much younger than the youngest *dge ma*, who is 14 years old. The purpose of the children's stay at La phyi is to teach them the Tibetan alphabet and some basic Buddhist teachings, such as instructions on meditation posture or the "four thoughts" (*blo ldog rnams bzhi*). The youngsters are also expected to show up for the daily chant (*gsol ka*).⁸²⁹ They are not prohibited from entering the proper meditation training; however, the children have to make this decision and their parents must grant their permission for them to do so. In the case

⁸²⁴ Although from the technical point of view, they could have a different main "root guru" (Skt. *mūlaguru*, Tib. *rtsa ba'i bla ma*) and adopt Tshul khrims mthar phyin as guru specifically for the three-year retreat. For the different types of *rtsa ba'i bla ma*, see 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse 1981, 2: fols. 43-44.

⁸²⁵ Polyandry is still widely practiced in Nang chen and sDe dge areas in Khams.

⁸²⁶ See above in Tshul khrims mthar phyin's life story.

⁸²⁷ See below for the La phyi-Ya chen cooperation.

⁸²⁸ I myself also could not travel through Sichuan, but the road was open when I was traveling from sDe dge to Chengdu two months later.

⁸²⁹ For the *blo ldog rnams bzhi* and *gsol ka* see below in the section on the Secret Life of the hermitage.

of boys who begin their schooling at La phyi, they are not allowed to stay past the age of puberty. The only exception is the three-year retreat, for which a minimum age of 16 is required. Hence, the La phyi boys are, as Tshul khriims mthar phyin expressed it “on their way out to Khang ne or sKyo brag *bshad grwa*.” Most of them would like to continue their education at sKyo brag and become monks or “yogins” (*rnal 'byor pa*).⁸³⁰ They already sport an appearance that helps them blend in with the ordained *dge ma* and lamas –their hair is shorn and they have to wear red robes. They are also allowed to act like children: to run, shout and frolic as long as it does not disturb the silence during the meditation sessions. All of the children have an adult relative living here; they are accommodated and provided for with them. Some of the children admit that they miss their parents; others consider La phyi to be their home.

The 15 construction workers form a separate group. They are here temporarily to work on the construction of the upper *sgrub khang*, located at the bDe mchog *gnas*. 14 of them are Khams pa men from the area: Rab shis, rDza stod and sKye dgu mdo. They are not paid for their labor and work here because they are relatives of the *sgrub khang* sponsor named sGra dbyangs (who happens to be 'Jigs med grags pa's cousin). The single Han Chinese worker on the spot is the only hired professional, who receives pay from the manager of the hermitage. He has lived in sKyo brag for several years and helped with the construction of the first *sgrub khang* and some of the cabins, paid either by Tshul khriims mthar phyin directly or by a family of a prospective retreatant.

The workers stay in their own tent, situated by the construction site and slightly aside the central premises; this is also where they cook and eat. To buy their provisions and anything they need for the construction, the men travel down to the village or to Shar mda' on their motorcycles, in jeeps or trucks. They all heard of Tshul khriims mthar phyin's greatness before and know that this place is considered a *gnas*, which they understand as an extension of the main sKyo brag power place. However, to explain the motivation for coming here, they claim that they came to Chab sti to help the sponsor sGra dbyangs, who is not only the *gnyer pa*'s relative but also has four *dge ma* cousins living here. He comes from Rab shis and considers Tshul khriims mthar phyin to be his root guru; his fame reached sGra dbyangs long ago. His main income stems from selling livestock and caterpillar fungus.

⁸³⁰ They also like to play yogins. I witnessed a lively 8-year old, who took off his upper robe, sat in meditation posture, and announced to other children that he was a “*rnal 'byor pa*.”

IX.6.1. Pilgrims and visitors

On both of its levels the hermitage is a place of frequent visits. Callers are allowed, as long as the male guests do not stay on the premises over night, which Tshul khrims mthar phyin explains as a rule to prevent the breaking of celibacy vows. An exception to this rule is made for construction workers and the elderly monks who are also related to either Tshul khrims mthar phyin or 'Jigs med grags pa.

Level 0 frequently hosts families of retreatants who bring food, monks and nuns appearing for an occasional session of teachings (*skad cha*) from Tshul khrims mthar phyin's son or a visiting *mkhan po* from Ya chen as well as lay people from the village coming for the same purpose. Tshul khrims mthar phyin has also offered 'pho ba courses, which were open to all and especially popular among the unordained.

Pilgrims frequent both levels. They are mainly older locals who come here to venerate the Chab sti *gnas* on the 15th day of the month, and although most of them know its history, often they are not aware of the specific deities, which are said to reside here.⁸³¹ However, there are also eminent visitors like the great rNying ma lama A khyung rin po che, who once journeyed to the Vajrasattva *gnas* of Chab sti.⁸³² The pilgrims support the La phyi community with donations of butter and *tsam pa*. They do not only come to perform circumambulations (*skor ba*); they frequently visit their daughters who are in retreat here.

There may also be relatives inspecting the land with Tshul khrims mthar phyin or the manager to find the right spot for a new hut. A middle-aged man north of Nang chen Shar mda' explains:

I have come here to see the place, because I would like to build a cabin for my three teenage daughters who are planning to come here for longer retreat. They heard about the *grub thob* (=Tshul khrims mthar phyin) and so they decided to come here. It is true that they wanted to become nuns before that; still the lama here is the best teacher around.

Since Tshul khrims mthar phyin's fame has traveled far beyond sKyo brag, devotees flock from places as remote as far-away locations like Shanghai, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Japan, although this does not happen frequently.⁸³³ As for Westerners, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's

⁸³¹ And even more interesting, while many of my lay interviewers knew about the Vajrasattva *gnas*, not one of them was aware of the newest addition to this powerfield in the form of bDe mchog and Phags mo *mandalas*. It seems like this dimension of Chab sti is still exclusively acknowledged by the La phyi trainees, who do not only apply themselves to the veneration of the *gnas*, but also use the practices dedicated to these specific Tantric forms.

⁸³² See below in this chapter.

⁸³³ For the popularity of Khams pa hermitages among non-Tibetans, compare Terrone 2009: 87.

son Tshul khrims bdud 'dul told our group in 2007 that his father has generally been reluctant to see them since he was visited the year before by a group of American students of an exiled Karma bKa' brgyud pa lama, A kong Tulku, who was the founder of the "Samye Ling" international network of Buddhist centers.⁸³⁴ After this visit, Tshul khrims mthar phyin evaluated them as "not being genuinely interested in the dharma" and consequently stopped meeting with tourists and other non-believers. Thus, visitors are assessed for the sincerity of their engagement in Buddhism on Level 0 by Tshul khrims mthar phyin's son and the manager-monk. "If people don't have trust, they should not come here," Tshul khrims mthar phyin added.

The yogin is not antagonistic to instructing lay people; by voicing this requirement, he is probably attempting to avoid the fate of several monasteries in Khams that became sightseer attractions or "ethnic villages" that Huber reported on. By securing the atmosphere of dedication, Tshul khrims mthar phyin ensures the quality of instructions given here and simultaneously maintains the overall reputation of La phyi as a successful training facility.

All visitors are usually expected to leave by nightfall, although in exceptional cases they may stay the night in an empty cabin. They are not allowed to stay on Level I longer than their pre-arranged purpose (which means as short as possible, with the exception of people who come to Level I for retreat). If they walk past the *sgrub khang*, they are not allowed to look into the windows.⁸³⁵

In 2006, La phyi received medical help when two Tibetan doctors from Lha sa traveled here for three days at the request of the senior tutor of dPa bo rin po che, based in Lha sa.⁸³⁶

IX.6.2. The inclusivist La phyi *maṇḍala*

Thus, in spite of the renunciation vows, many people in the hermitage, including its guru, are in a way still involved with their families. From its very beginning, the development of the facility has entailed extending kinship links, but for the practitioners here, that does not mean that life in the hermitage is similar to family life outside. This development actually indicates that family and clan ties are an important foundation for social action and religious life in the area of Yushu TAP. Moreover, what makes this community so different from others can be observed at the first sight: it emphasizes the priorities in the life of a model Buddhist

⁸³⁴ See <http://www.samyeling.org/> (accessed 20.01.2011).

⁸³⁵ This is to ensure that the rules of the three-year retreat are followed. See below for the section on this type of sealed retreat.

⁸³⁶ This piece of information was graciously provided by Dr. Mingkyi Tsomo.

practitioner; Tshul khrims mthar phyin placed his family members on the lowest position in the topography of the hermitage.

What attracts new members of the community is most of all, the guru, which is why the society of La phyi resembles the Tantric principle of the *maṇḍala*. This is why life at La phyi radically differs from other forms of community life outside the boundaries of the hermitage. Rather than leading a family life like anywhere else, members of the community focus around the guru as a representation of enlightenment.

Human bonds at La phyi are also determined by the discipline rules, which regulate every aspect of the individual and social behavior of the residents. Therefore, the group itself has a didactic function. This role is expressed in the fundamental Buddhist teachings of the Refuge (*skyabs 'gro*), where the *sangha* (Tib. *dge 'dun*) plays a central role, right next to the Buddha and the *dharma*. In this closely-knit community, on top of (and sometimes, in spite of) the pre-existing family ties, people develop new bonds. According to the Buddhist tradition, these new relationships are much more important for the success of the meditation training than any other interpersonal links. By following the same teacher, program and rules, the nuns strongly rely on the support of their co-practitioners, which, as Tshul khrims mthar phyin explained, is especially significant in the case of women:

If a nun starts her retreat on her own, she will face difficulties. Nuns need to be in a group. It looks like Western women are more self-reliant, but Kham pa women are small-minded (*blo rgya chung*).⁸³⁷

Although the direct exchange with the community is important in the training of beginners, as individuals progress on their path, the importance of the group in their life is expected to decrease. Like the advanced *ras pa* disciples before them, they might then opt for more advanced training in a smaller and definitely closed community, i.e. the three-year retreat in a sealed *sgrub khang*. After its completion, hermits tend to go into solitary retreat. This way, collective life in the hermitage is seen as training for independent practice and absolute detachment. It becomes a transition from worldly society to the sphere of complete transcendence, while the consecrated community of the *sangha* is seen as a vital source of support on the path.⁸³⁸

⁸³⁷ In spite of this remark, it is important to note that Tshul khrims mthar phyin does not limit his female disciples; they receive the same possibilities as the monks. For a few notes on the issue of gender at La phyi, see below for a separate section.

⁸³⁸ Also see the discussion on renunciation below.

For the practitioners at La phyi, mutual assistance plays a vital role, and so the *sgom grwa* becomes a safe haven for developing a sense of purpose, coherence and connectedness. In the shifting and demanding reality of Yushu TAP, which represents the suffering of *samsāra*, the hermitage shelters the existence of an egalitarian community, whose members form bonds that transcend family connections and gender roles of rural and pastoral men and women in Khams. In this way, they are able to counteract the social roles of the modern and secularized world of Juola Xiang. Living in the sacred landscape in harmony with its ritual architecture, the La phyi community is a group structured solely according to the previously suppressed, indigenous narratives of self-fulfillment for a greater good, encompassing all beings; it is a community devoted to texts, practices and roles that emphasize their unique ethnic identity. This type of a community is a desirable offer for counteracting the collective “identity crisis” mentioned in the previous chapter.

Contrary to the idea of hermitism as an elitist practice, the sacred *maṇḍala* circle was opened to include non-renunciates. Thus, the entire La phyi “metacommunity,” encompassing the lay and the ordained at different stages of training, resembles another instance of a Buddhist revival. Similar to Theravada revivalists of the “Buddha-Jayanti movement” in Sri Lanka in the 1950s, the La phyi hermits and their supporters are the new elite with the task of re-interpreting Buddhist tradition “to find their personal and corporate identities.”⁸³⁹

These efforts could be seen as a response to the demanding post-colonial/colonial reality where society, its culture and economy undergo rapid change. A community able to accommodate the three types of motivation (*karma*-oriented, pragmatic and *bodhi*) is at the same time able to re-incorporate a whole range of traditional social roles and offer a sense of belonging to anyone, no matter where his/her actions lie in this scale.

It is true that in spite of its broad social offer, La phyi essentially remains a facility for the training of a religious elite. This explains why Tshul khrims mthar phyin recognizes the superior value of the *bodhi* motivation over the other types of behavior:

In Tibet everyone is a Buddhist, but most people do not actually practice; while others only practice a little in hope of getting to the Pure Land after death.

Still, everyone is welcome at La phyi as long as she/he meets Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s general requirement – to exhibit authentic interest in the Buddhist teachings. Repeating the *maṇi*, making donations and contributions to work at the construction sites will accumulate merit; in order to directly influence one’s daily life, the visitor can consult Tshul khrims mthar

⁸³⁹ Bond 1992: 33.

phyin who is believed to be clairvoyant and capable of performing miracles; and those who aspire to achieve liberation and enlightenment will be offered the comprehensive training program. In this way, La phyi is a venue dedicated to personal fulfillment of all who contribute to reviving the traditional cosmology of deities inhabiting the Chab sti/sKyo brag landscape, powerful yogins, determined practitioners, influential donors and pious lay folk. The revival of traditional values is an effective strategy which helps to adjust to the challenges of life in today's Juola Xiang.⁸⁴⁰

IX.7. Notes on the question of gender

The growing number of ordained women is a special feature of the current revival of Buddhism in Khams. While different statistics are ascribed to sample regions in both the TAR and beyond, it is clear that in the recent years both the number of nunneries and their residents has been on the rise.⁸⁴¹ According to my observations from Khams, there are many areas where the traditional disproportion of monks as the majority and nuns as the minority might not exist, especially in meditation schools.

La phyi contains a nunnery which is clearly larger than its male counterpart. However, analyzing the meditation school of La phyi from the perspective of gender does not lie among the research objectives of this paper. This is why I have been referring to the nuns more generally as inhabitants of the rural areas of sKyo brag village and the northern Nang chen county, rather than exclusively focusing on their gender. I have decided to analyze the nun subgroup mainly because they are the ones training in the open *sgom grwa*; the men are sealed in the *sgrub khang* and no contact with them is permitted.⁸⁴²

Of course, the social conditioning of females has to be taken into account when investigating the mechanisms of vocation, where the rejection of social roles takes place. Nevertheless, I have decided to not to analyze the gender factor in greater detail for several reasons. Firstly, this specific aspect of the current ethno-religious revival among Tibetans inside and outside the TAR, as well as in the broader context of post-Mao China, has already

⁸⁴⁰ Compare Qin 2000: 71 and refer to the fragments on renunciation and millenarianism in the current chapter.

⁸⁴¹ Kolås & Thowsen (2005: 87) note further problems in terms of statistics: the official number of monks and nuns in monasteries is almost always reduced due to the government control of the quantity of members in monasteries and nunneries. For the growing number of nuns, see Havnevik 1994: 260.

⁸⁴² I also cannot report that since I am a female myself and therefore pose no threat to the celibacy vows of the nuns, it was “easier” for me to access them as opposed to interviewing monks. In fact, for the almost compulsive timidity of many nuns, my experience proved exactly the opposite: I found it more difficult to interview the nuns than the monks.

been accounted for to a large extent by Havnevik, Makley and Qin respectively.⁸⁴³ Secondly, the data from my fieldwork does not suggest that the instance of the ethno-religious revival at the Chab sti mountain could be androcentric, nor does it depict the position of females as particularly underprivileged.

Of all the different studies on the situation of Tibetan women and/or female Buddhist practitioners in the PRC today, especially the studies by Makley and Qin present two extreme examples of female agency and its circumstances. My case study would perhaps lie in the middle of these extremes: at La phyi, the women are neither branded/subjectified (as in Makley) nor are they the primary, almost sole agents of the revival (Qin).

The discussion on the lack of *bhikṣuṇī*-vows for Tibetan women is also irrelevant for my case study.⁸⁴⁴ Because in Tibetan areas, the tradition of the complete ordination vows never developed, the women of La phyi are content with their *dge ma* status. Even though the construction of the highly honorific term *dge ma* used when referring to nuns in the local dialect actually refers to the lower type of vows, the *dge tshul ma* ordination,⁸⁴⁵ it proves that the social rank of “women of virtue” is high in these areas. The designation emphasizes the chance for education and the promotion from an ordinary lay woman to a traditionally revered monastic practitioner.

Tshul khriims mthar phyin does harbor a certain degree of preconceived ideas toward females, and he described Khams pa women as “small-minded” (*sems blo rgya chung*). Still, in the face of the shortage of adequate training facilities for women, he admitted that his original motivation for the founding of La phyi was to meet the needs of the local female practitioners.⁸⁴⁶

The empowerment of women at La phyi goes even further. They are allowed to use the most advanced Tantric methods under the direction of the master known as “The Third Mi la ras pa;” they are also permitted to enter the innermost centers of the *maṇḍalas* (Vajrasattva, bDe mchog, Phag mo) and to practice in the most sacred of all Chab sti caves, the gSer

⁸⁴³ Havnevik 1989, Makley 2007, Qin 2000. Also see Gyatso & Havnevik 2005, and Diemberger 2005 and 2007. For a note on the feminist critique of religious traditions and asceticism, see Flood 2004: 246-252.

⁸⁴⁴ This was emphasized by Nancy Barnes (1996) in her pan-Asian study of the different female monastic trends, which involve the recent endorsement of the *bhikṣuṇī* vows for ordained women, including Tibetan nuns living in exile. However, since these vows had never been known among Tibetans, I believe that most nuns at La phyi are unaware of the privileges that the higher vows entail.

⁸⁴⁵ It is possible that *dge ma* is an abbreviation from *dge tshul ma*.

⁸⁴⁶ Compare a very similar observation from field studies made by Makley (2005: 270).

phug.⁸⁴⁷ In fact, even the Chab sti legends recount the famous female practitioner: sKyo brag Chos rje's consort, the *dākinī* A khro ma.⁸⁴⁸

It is also true that the master-disciples (i.e. the two *gtum mo* accomplishers) are men, and that, as 'Jigs med grags pa stated, the *ras pas* of the future will be men rather than women, but there are practical reasons for this statement. Firstly, it is not so much that the female practitioners at La phyi are seen as incapable of spiritual accomplishment in general, but the formula of the specific transmission of the *gtum mo* of Six Yogas of Nāro pa is seen as physically demanding and thus more suitable for male practitioners – as opposed to another version of that practice transmitted by a female guru called Nigu ma and perpetrated by the Shangs pa bKa' brgyud lineage.⁸⁴⁹

Tshul khriims mthar phyin does not justify the lack of women among his prominent disciples by claiming they were less capable. Instead, he explains it with regard to La phyi's gradual development:

[Even the most experienced] nuns have only been here for three years. In the future, after another 7 or 10 years, they will become very good.

The prospect of practicing the most sophisticated Tantric methods under a famous guru in the heart of the sacred territory addressed to local women is in fact a strong factor that promotes female practitioners at Tshul khriims mthar phyin's hermitage. This positions the master among many of today's reformist leaders who not only acknowledge, but also encourage the rapid upsurge in religious interests among women.

This reformist trend could be one if the consequences of the destruction and uprooting of the traditional culture, which, as Nancy Barnes believes, has caused religious directors to be more capable of accommodating change.⁸⁵⁰ Other authors have expressed similar thoughts, even if in a different context. Sallie B. King, who analyzes socially engaged Buddhism and its reformatory action in diverse Asian countries, observes that in Buddhist societies scarred by conflicts rooted in political ideology, religious leaders tend to be more prone to introduce or support change, since they know the threat of dogmatism.⁸⁵¹

⁸⁴⁷ In contrast to the traditional prohibition for women to enter the innermost heart of the *gnas*; compare Huber 1992.

⁸⁴⁸ The only architectural feature that might suggest advocating the superiority of male practitioners, the *sgrub khang* at Level I (as opposed to the nuns' *sgrub khangs* at Level 0) primarily reflects the historical development of Tshul khriims mthar phyin's activity at Chab sti and the hierarchy of experienced practitioners over the inexperienced.

⁸⁴⁹ Modern transmission of the Shangs pa is centered around Kong sprul's Tsā 'dra in sDe dge.

⁸⁵⁰ King 1996: 285-6.

⁸⁵¹ King 1996: 285-6.

All the aforementioned instances of research on the role of women in today's Buddhist revival indicate several routes to consider in order to comprehend the popularity of retreat practice among the female population of Khams. Since answering this question would exceed the scope of this work, I would only like to quote a passage by Serenity Young, one that best expresses the course that I would choose to tackle this issue:

A defeated people often looks to the women of its community to uphold its communal values, and these values are often expressed more conservatively during crises than in other periods.⁸⁵²

IX.8. The cooperation between *La phyi sgom grwa* and *Ya chen chos sgar*

At *La phyi*, tradition is both remembered and reformed. On the one hand, the symbols of ritual power used to design the ritual landscape and to guide the community are all traditional, on the other, *Tshul khri mthar phyin* is not reviving an old hermitage, rather launching a completely new venture that is largely directed toward women. Judging by its speed of growth, I suspect it is even possible that *La phyi*'s success as a training center will eventually supersede the reputation of the *sKyo brag* monastery itself – that would be another novelty in the local balance of religious power.

The close relationship that the *La phyi* hermitage enjoys with *Ya chen chos sgar* in the Sichuan province, another venue for religious education, emphasizes the special role of modern-day, innovative projects that are however firmly rooted in the past. I will present their cooperation to indicate that they are a part of a collective initiative, bound by a number of shared religious and social goals. Since they address both elitist and popular audiences, their impact is constantly on the rise. Together, they form a plexus of highly successful educational projects. As Terrone has it:

When we analyze the popularity gained by forms of religious gathering such as the religious encampments and mountain hermitages in eastern areas of Tibet, we realise how eclectic education, traditional religious instruction, and the presence of a charismatic leader seem to create the ideal ground for religious development in present-day Eastern Tibet.⁸⁵³

Ya chen O rgyan bsam gtan chos gling, otherwise known as “the dharma encampment of *Ya chen*” (Tib. *Ya chen chos sgar*; Chin. *Yaqing Si*) is situated at an elevation of 4,000 meters AMSL, in a secluded valley in *dPas yul* county, *dKar mdzes* prefecture, Sichuan

⁸⁵² Young 2000: 239.

⁸⁵³ Terrone 2009: 76.

province.⁸⁵⁴ It was established in 1985 at a sacred site as known as “Ya chen, the Second Copper Colored Mountain” (Ya chen *dpal ri gnyis pa*), a venue for study and meditation by the rNying ma lama A khyug Lung rtogs rgyal mtshan (b. 1927),⁸⁵⁵ an incarnation of *gter ston* from Kaḥ thog, Longs gsal snying po (1625-1682) and an important modern *gter ston* himself.⁸⁵⁶ mKhan po A khyug, as he is known to most, was a disciple of Khrom dge A rig (c.1908-1988), a modern accomplisher of the “rainbow body” (*’ja’ lus*), as well as the illustrious mKhan po ’Jigs phun, founder of gSer rta institute. He also obtained teachings from preceptors of other schools and lineages, especially the Lam ’bras cycle.⁸⁵⁷ Having studied and served teachers of all schools, he developed a non-sectarian attitude. He is said to have spent over 40 years in retreat and after the passing of mKhan po ’Jigs phun, mKhan po A khyug became the unquestionable head of the rNying ma school within the PRC.⁸⁵⁸

I visited Ya chen in 2007 and was told that its entire population consisted of 10,000 monks and nuns, although the majority of the inhabitants were nuns. This would make it the second-largest religious institution in the Tibetan regions of the PRC after gSer rta bla rung. At that time, Ya chen was a cold, windy place, lacking basic facilities like running water or electricity. The most striking thing was the housing: long rows of slum-like structures, tiny booths plastered with inexpensive plastic tablecloth, wooden planks stashed together and covered with a plastic plane, etc. The central position was occupied by the main temple and the adjacent house of the mKhan po. Packs of hungry dogs roamed the dirt tracks between the lodgings and the venue made a busy, but extremely austere impression. At an audience with the great master, his assistant presented us with photographs featuring mKhan po A khyug. They would have been ordinary souvenirs, if not for a small detail: as one looked closer, one could see the master’s forehead bearing “self-manifest” (*rang byon*) images of Avalokiteśvara and Samantabhadra as if his face were a *thang ka*.⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁴ As for other names for this site, an indigenous literary production mentions the venue as “Ya chen chos kyi zhing khams.” See *Thog mtha’ bar gsum du dge ba’i gtam lta sgom spyod gsum* (n.d.): 36. Interestingly enough, the road sign marking the spot reads “Ya chen dgon.”

⁸⁵⁵ Other spelling variants A chos or A chug Terrone 2009: 92.

⁸⁵⁶ For Ya chen as ritual territory, see Terrone 2009: 92.

⁸⁵⁷ Although mKhan po A khyug’s fate in the years 1959-1980 is not clear, it is said he served his teacher, lama A rig without concern for his own safety and life. See Terrone 2009: 73.

⁸⁵⁸ “Akhyuk Rinpoche” at http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Achuk_Rinpoche (accessed 04.02.2011), Terrone 2009: 90-97; also see ’Jam dbyangs rdo rje, et al. 2005: 519—521.

⁸⁵⁹ It is common among Khams pas to spread photographs of great contemporary teachers, which are said to reflect their profound realization through displaying wonders. The mentioned picture is also featured on the front cover of the small booklet I obtained at Ya chen and mentioned before, entitled *Thog mtha’ bar gsum du dge ba’i gtam lta sgom spyod gsum*. Compare Terrone 2009: 92.

At Ya chen, any monk or nun is admitted, regardless of their sectarian denomination, but the main point of exposition is the rDzogs pa chen po tradition.⁸⁶⁰ Due to the popularity of this training venue throughout Khams, A mdo and the TAR, the teaching is organized into “houses” (*khamts tshan*), where, similarly to the great monasteries in pre-modern Tibet, people can study in their own dialect.⁸⁶¹

As in the case in La phyi, Ya chen follows the open-door policy, so people are free to join or leave as they please. The focus of the Ya chen training is the classical study program consisting of the “ten sciences” (*rig pa'i gnas bcu*), the completion of which is crowned with the “mkhan po”/“mkhan mo” title.⁸⁶² Preliminary meditation practice is also taught – beginning with the “four contemplations” (*blo ldog rnam bzhi*), the *gtong len*, and some basic rDzogs chen practices. For more advanced meditation training, nuns are sent elsewhere to more remote areas. One such hermitage I was able to find out about is the meditation school at Brag ri g.yu mkhar, located 30 minutes outside of the dKar mdzes town; another one is La phyi *sgom grwa* by sKyo brag.⁸⁶³

For all its parallels to gSer rta, in 2001 Ya chen also suffered a crackdown, which occurred directly after the suppression of gSer rta.⁸⁶⁴ The International Campaign for Tibet reports that at Ya chen, more than 800 lodgings were classified for annihilation by order of the dPas yul (Chin. Baiyu) County Government officials. Nuns and monks of Ya chen were told to pull down and demolish their homes or else face legal action.⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁶⁰ Obviously, the monks' and the nuns' living quarters are separated to avoid breaches of celibacy. A two-winged meditation school/institute for both men and women is a model I frequently observed throughout Khams.

⁸⁶¹ Terrone 2009: 91.

⁸⁶² For more on the Ya chen curriculum, designed with the help of the gSer rta *mkhan po*, see Terrone 2009: 96.

⁸⁶³ The *ri khrod* at Brag ri g.yu mkhar is another non-sectarian community of practitioners, encompassing mostly rDzogs chen-trained Ya chen nuns and directed by a Karma bKa' brgyud pa lama, disciple of the late Grub chen Karma nor bu. For its history see Tshe ring dbang rgyal & Ya ma mgon po 2005: 88-97.

⁸⁶⁴ Compare pamphlet *gSer rta bla rung lnga rig chos kyi grong khyer gyi yar rgyas dang chag 'jig* (n.d.).

⁸⁶⁵ Translation of wall poster (in Tibetan and Mandarin) signed by the Pelyul County's Peoples Government: “Public Notice. For the purpose of steady improvement and maintenance of Tromthar Yachen Monastery in Pelyul County, well-coordinated care, protection, and good work is needed. Following the Pelyul County Peoples Government's research and scrutiny of Yachen Monastery's management and maintenance, the following actions are being taken: During the thorough research and scrutiny for the care and protection of the monastery, the [Pelyul County] work team's scheme shows those monks and nuns living quarters that are outside the boundary [permissible] must be demolished by the 15th September 2001. If these homes are not destroyed [by their occupants] by the aforementioned date, Pelyul County People's Government will forcefully demolish the living quarters, and in accordance with the current legal framework, legal action will be taken against those individuals who have not abided by this order. Monks and nuns from other counties [other than Pelyul county], as well as Chinese monks and nuns, must leave and return to their native places and be disconnected from Yachen Monastery. This must take place by the 15th September 2001. Failure to leave the monastery and return to their place of origin will result in strict legal action taken against such individuals by the Pelyul County People's Government in accordance with the Sichuan Province Religious Management Committee and the legal system of Household Registration. This public notice has been issued to the above stated effect. [Signed:] Pelyul County People's Government 1st September 2001.” (International Campaign for Tibet 2001, “Destruction of

When I was in Khams again in 2008, Ya chen's position was difficult, following the post-olympic uprising which occurred throughout Central and Eastern Tibet. The situation in Sichuan was especially tense. Movement within the Tibetan areas of the province was restricted, and especially monks and nuns were prohibited from travelling.

Although the La phyi hermitage is situated as far as several days' travel away from Ya chen by bus and car on arduous roads, it has been cooperating with the *chos sgar* practically from the beginning of Tshul khrim mThar phyin's career as meditation instructor at Chab sti. The connection was at first a personal link between the masters A khyug and Tshul khrims mthar phyin, as the latter visited Ya chen in 2002, while on pilgrimage to the Chinese power place of Wutanshan. He was travelling with his *ras pa* student and they stopped at both gSer rta and Ya chen (they stayed at the last site for a month). Some time after this, A khyug mkhan po came for pilgrimage to Chab sti. Ever since, the connection of the two lamas has developed to include many of their disciples.

First of all, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's son and close student, Tshul khrims bdud 'dul, was sent to Ya chen for one month of study in 2008; he had also been there previously. His mother said that Tshul khrims mthar phyin wanted this to happen, as did both gSal dga' and A bstan phun tshogs. Tshul khrims bdud 'dul was therefore sent to mKhan po A khyug at the request of the sKyo brag revivalist trinity.

In 2007 at La phyi, I met two tutors (*mkhan po*) from Ya chen, but their stay at the hermitage was only temporary. The La phyi *gnyer pa* explained that at Ya chen, there were many learned scholars; they were also more in number than at the nearby sKyo brag.

Several nuns I interviewed at La phyi in 2008 admitted to have started their training at Ya chen first. Then they either heard of Tshul khrims mthar phyin and his place at Ya chen, or they were natives of sKyo brag and preferred to be closer to home. At times young sKyo brag nuns would journey to Ya chen just to meet mKhan po A khyug; then they would return to their home area to join the La phyi project.

Several young Ya chen nuns have also decided to come to La phyi for their three-year retreat in the two new *sgrub khang* enclosures, which were planned to be inaugurated later in 2008.

That Tshul khrims mthar phyin and mKhan po A khyug represent two distinct schools, is not a hindrance to anyone. 'Jigs med grags pa says:

They both want to benefit all living beings, although it is true that one cannot have two root lamas and has to make a decision. Nevertheless, there is a connection between these two masters.

In 2008, living on Level I, there were two nuns who were following A khyug and would at some point return to Ya chen. They had been there for three months as political refugees – unable to travel back since they would have to pass through a large section of Sichuan province.⁸⁶⁶ They received their provisions from relatives based in Shar mda'. I was told that the presence of these nuns was a politically sensitive issue and will not be discussed further.

⁸⁶⁶ See above for restrictions on travel in Sichuan in 2008.

X. La phyi *sgom grwa*: The Inner Life

The less accessible or obvious sphere of the functioning of the hermitage, which I will refer to as its “inner life,” will begin with a description of inner spaces devoted to individual practice. Principally though, just as the “inner” sphere of Tantric practice (*nang gi chos*) refers to the generation of the correct motivation (*bodhicitta*), in the current chapter I will relate several accounts of personal vocation. Subsequently, I will discuss the nature of renunciation and its value for the revival of religious and ethnic identities in today’s sKyo brag.

X.1. Inside a nun’s cabin

The cabin is a nun’s most immediate environment for personal training. For this reason, it is usually restricted to her instructor and co-practitioners.

Similar to cabins at other hermitages I have visited in Khams, most huts at La phyi do not exceed 20 square meters. They are cuboid-shaped; most of them merely have an adobe floor (the most comfortable huts I saw had a raw brick floor). The roof is often insulated with straw and has leaks. The front wall has two windows; the La phyi insulation standard is single glass panes.⁸⁶⁷ If a hut stands on uneven ground, a small brick or concrete staircase leads to the door. In such cases, a miniature store for wood is constructed right next to the steps. The outside and inside walls are white-washed.

Inside, the cabins are supported with one pillar located in the center or divided into two chambers. The central point of the smaller compartment is the stove. The thin aluminium chimney passes through a hole in the roof. The kitchen or kitchen section is the place for keeping pots, food supplies, fuel, household utensils and a bucket for fetching water. It is used for cooking and eating. When a hut consists of two rooms, the kitchen is also the area one enters through the front door.

The second room is more protected; it is the main space used for practice. Depending on the number of inhabitants, it contains one to three meditation boxes, which are the most important pieces of furniture.⁸⁶⁸ Everything else, whether cupboards, a random bench or a stool, is optional in these austere surroundings. The meditation room is furnished with either make-shift gear, like a bench made of a board supported on bricks, or with real furniture, colorfully painted in Tibetan style, depending on the individual wealth of the inhabitant.

⁸⁶⁷ Unlike other, even more austere retreat huts observed in Khams, whose windows have no glass panes, but sheets of paper instead.

⁸⁶⁸ For a description of a meditation box, refer to the portrayal of rules in daily life above.

There is no fixed shrine at most cabins; sacred images are scattered everywhere instead. The walls are plastered with posters of lamas, both local like Tshul khrim mthar phyin, gSal byed, other sKyo brag reincarnates, and more distant ones, among which mKhan po 'Jigs phun is most commonly seen. There are photographs of exiled teachers – Si tu pa, Dalai Lama's Karma pa O rgyan 'phrin las, pictures of deities or the 'Ba' rom Tree for Preliminary Practices (*sngon 'gro'i tshogs zhing*),⁸⁶⁹ posters of the sKyo brag monastery as well as other temples photographed inside and outside.

The average nun owns only a few books, most of which are used for practice.⁸⁷⁰ The cabins are untidy in appearance, as items for everyday and ritual use are mixed and scattered over the whole interior. Practice texts, alarm clocks, bowls, prayer-wheels, medication, pens, or pieces of clothing are all around, but in the midst of this domestic disarray, the meditation boxes tower above it all as reminders of the actual purpose for living at La phyi.

Out of all of these ordinary objects and decorations, the pictures plastered on the walls require an additional explanation. It might appear that the photographs of famous bKa' brgyud pa lamas from the Tibetan diaspora form a coherent picture with the representations of other religious leaders, yet the concealed implications of some of those images make them extraordinary. As figures of exiled Tibetan leaders are invoked within the PRC, they provoke strong feelings of religious, ethnic and even national pride. Since they relate to the “pan-Tibetan” religious identity, these photographs are projections of longing for a free expression of religious and ethnic sentiments as well as for political autonomy.

Hanging inside some of the cabins I saw posters of the 'Ba' rom school that included both the sKyo brag lamas and the diaspora. As images of local and exiled lamas merge into one collage on the wall of a La phyi hut, the effect achieved is a conscious presentation of a strong, unified 'Ba' rom school and its “unbroken” continuity. Such demonstration of indigenous tradition as invulnerable to change is a technique used widely in the 'Ba' rom revival.

X.2. Brusque portraits of hermitic vocation

Renunciation is a powerful mechanism, though paradoxical in its effects: already at the first moment of renunciation, everything that hermits reject, turns into their networks of resources, through which they receive support and high social standing. These resource networks is what has been keeping this mechanism going throughout centuries; their revival is also the reason

⁸⁶⁹ An outline of the lineage and whole Buddhist Refuge in form of a tree.

⁸⁷⁰ See below for the section on scriptures used for practice.

why people can go into retreat today. The dynamics will be analyzed in greater detail below, but first I shall report on individual accounts of vocation told by four nuns and one monk living at La phyi, all of whom are *tshe tshams pa* – life-long retreatants.⁸⁷¹

The majority of the nuns come to La phyi while still in their teens, but there are also older ones. For some, meeting the master was the main impulse for rejecting worldly existence, but many of the *dge ma* had wished to lead a religious life in retreat even before they encountered Tshul khrims mthar phyin. There are others who had been in a nunnery or in retreat before.

The narrative of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's life has been discussed. His personal history of vocation, shaped in accordance with the legend of Mi la ras pa and the life of Karma nor bu is the direct paradigm applied in the environment of La phyi.⁸⁷²

X.2.1. Chos nyid dpal mo

Chos nyi dpal mo, 43 years of age, comes from the nearby sKyo brag village. Slightly overweight, which is unusual in this ascetic environment, she lives in one of the huts on her own – another rarity at La phyi. She is currently practicing her reading and writing skills and her basic practice is the four Preliminaries (*sngon 'gro*) as well as some self-study in the basic tenets of Buddhism.⁸⁷³ Since she is still not fluent in reading, she does not join the daily group *pūjā* (*gsol ka*).

Chos nyid dpal mo has been at La phyi for three years and would like to stay here until she dies. She took nun's vows after her husband passed away. The ordination took place at sKyo brag monastery and was conducted by the sKyo brag gSal dga'. Since she had no children to take care of, she immediately decided to become a hermitess. She selected La phyi, because she would like to be closer to the lama [i.e. Tshul khrims mthar phyin] who impressed her when she was a young girl. Like all local people, she knew he had stayed alone in the Chab sti area, although she did not go see him back then. She thinks her parents did. She knows that the master (*bla rgan*) first wore a red robe and traveled in company of other lamas, but does not have more information about the life of Tshul khrims mthar phyin.

Another reason for choosing La phyi is its proximity to her home area; the nearest nunnery is situated much farther away.⁸⁷⁴ In fact, Chos nyi dpal mo still keeps a connection to her family because her brother directs the family enterprise of collecting *dbyar rtswa dgun'bu*. Thus, once a year she takes leave from La phyi and helps with the caterpillar fungus harvest. Her share of the earnings helps her sustain her modest lifestyle until the next season.

⁸⁷¹ All the interviews were conducted in October 2008.

⁸⁷² Even if it does not exclude the coexistence of non-*bodhi* motivations.

⁸⁷³ For more on the specific practices, see below.

⁸⁷⁴ At least three hours away from sKyo brag lies the Me thi dge nunnery along with its retreat center. Compare “Chodrak Methu Geygun Kacho Dechen Choling: a description and short history of the Nunnery,” at <http://www.chodraknunnery.org/index.html> (accessed 03.11.2010). The Me thi dge *sgrub khang*, which in 2007 housed 21 nuns, also invited Tshul khrims mthar phyin to give retreat-specific instructions. See “Poor conditions of old nunnery quarters” at http://www.chodraknunnery.org/nuns_retreats.html (accessed 03.02.2011) and the photograph below entitled “Ani in meditation box;” note the *thang ka*-like poster of Tshul khrims mthar phyin above her meditation box.

X.2.2. bKra shis bde chen

bKra shis bde chen is 14 years old and she is a native of sKyo brag. She has been at La phyi for a month and would like to stay here in life-long retreat (*tshe mtshams*). She is supported by her father who makes his living as a driver on a popular route between sKyo brag and sKye dgu mdo. bKra shis bde chen has got five siblings, most of whom are ordained as well, but the parents do not mind and they gladly support her. She is studying reading in the class run by Yon tan chu mtsho. She is also expected to practice the correct meditation posture – soon she will be ready for proper training and swap her bed for a meditation box.

In spite of being a teenager with a childlike appearance, bKra shis bde chen struck me with a mature outlook and awareness of her decision to become a meditator.

She presents her choice of lifestyle as a gradual process of developing spiritual interest at the direct inspiration of the master Tshul khrims mthar phyin himself. Since early childhood, she had been hearing stories about Tshul khrims mthar phyin's achievements. When she was eight years old, the lama came down to sKyo brag monastery to give public teachings and direct ceremonies. She saw Tshul khrims mthar phyin, all the monks and nuns and thought to herself: "How happy they seem! I would like to lead the same life. I am sure it will be good for me." She also felt fear of falling into lower realms. Initially, her parents were less enthusiastic as they believed her to be too young for ordination. However, she managed to take a modest vow (*sdom pa*) in the presence of Tshul khrims mthar phyin, suitable for a child: she promised not to swear.

As years passed, bKra shis bde chen went to a state grammar school and started with reading and writing Tibetan, but she did not give up her wish of spending more time with the lama. Now, she feels happy, since she can see him all the time. Ever since the public rituals the few years back, she feels grateful to him, as she believes that he can help the dying, bless them and send them off to a Pure Land (*sangs rgyas kyi zhing khams*).

Three of her cousins also live at La phyi as nuns. She explains that they are also supported by their families. bKra shis bde chen admits that she misses television, mostly cartoons.

X.2.3. Yon tan chu mtsho

Yon tan chu mtsho is 20 years old and soon after her arrival to La phyi, Tshul khrims mthar phyin appointed her as the reading teacher for a small group of children and illiterate nuns. She is furthermore responsible for explaining meditation posture to complete beginners and correcting it whenever required. As for her practice, she is currently in the last phase of the Preliminaries, in the *guruyoga*.⁸⁷⁵ Yon tan chu mtsho's co-inhabitant, who also took the vows that day, is away on a short leave to visit her village. Their hut is endowed with the luxuries of a radio and a solar panel.⁸⁷⁶

She came here four years ago from sKyo brag village and took ordination from Tshul khrims mthar phyin himself. The ceremony was performed in one of the larger cabins at Level 0.⁸⁷⁷

⁸⁷⁵ For the *sngon 'gro* see below.

⁸⁷⁶ In the light of the rules of the hermitage, it was not allowed to listen to the radio, but for some reason many nuns were unaware of this regulation, perhaps because it was not executed as opposed to other regulations. I assume Yon tan mtsho mo was one of them.

⁸⁷⁷ I was told that this ritual was carried out in different huts, or even in the open air.

Yon tan chu mtsho is willing to stay at La phyi in life-long retreat, but I dared not ask what would happen after the death of her parents, who support her. She came to La phyi to be close to its master, whom she considers a great teacher.

She does not regard her qualifications as a reading teacher to be very high and admits she learned the skill on her own. But then again, she says, she is just a reference person for any questions that might arise.

She said to me: “One can join our *sangha* at any moment. Do you want to?” When I tried to explain that at La phyi, I was already living the life of a nun, she replied: “It is not the same. You are allowed to wear laywoman’s clothes, long hair and jewellery!” From her words, I assumed what she missed mostly about lay life.

X.2.4. 'Jigs med grags pa

'Jigs med grags pa, the La phyi *gnyer pa* is 37 years old and comes from Rab shis, few hours away from Tshul khriims mthar phyin's native Kha cham. He became a monk at 14 at Shor phu *dgon*, a 'Ba' rom pa monastery, but soon became interested in the rDzogs chen practices instead, joining a Sa skya/rNying ma Nyi yag monastery.⁸⁷⁸ He focused on the rDzogs chen practice and had two years of retreat experience even before he met Tshul khriims mthar phyin.

'Jigs med grags pa heard about Tshul khriims mthar phyin from local lamas. Meeting him only fueled his enthusiasm for retreats. He first meditated at Chab sti for a year and decided this was what he had always wanted – most of his religious career involved chanting scriptures at people's homes. He does not plan the length of his stay at La phyi – he simply offered his body, speech and mind to Tshul khriims mthar phyin as his guru. This also means that 'Jigs med grags pa does not make independent decisions, even to leave for a few days; but then again, he does not want to.

He hopes the hermitage will produce more *gtum mo* accomplishers, but doubts that many of them will be women, since the *rtsa rlung* exercises are physically demanding and one needs plenty of strength to perform them well.

'Jigs med grags pa's father, the 68-year-old Tsha bo took ordination at Khang ne monastery a few years ago and is now helping with the construction of one of the *sgrub khangs*. Last winter he stayed at Level I in one of the cabins in *sngon 'gro* retreat and for the past two months he has been living in the workers' tent together with other volunteers, who help for three meals a day and receive no pay. To help raise money for the construction materials, 'Jigs med grags pa and Tsha bo sold their family property: jewellery, furniture and yaks.

'Jigs med grags pa has got two nieces at La phyi. His tasks involve buying food supplies or building materials, overseeing the discipline, taking care of the newcomers and guests, organizing teaching input for the nuns and administering medicine. Although not a qualified doctor, 'Jigs med grags pa knows about basic illnesses and keeps a store of essential medications in his hut; he says that he tries to encourage patients to turn their sickness into practice. Constantly busy, he is the most itinerant member of the hermitage. Inside La phyi, he goes between the huts and the levels; outside, he travels to sKyo brag, Shar mda' or even to sKye dgu mdo. In such cases, he arranges with the devotees of Tshul khriims mthar phyin from the village to take him down from Level 0 with a jeep.

⁸⁷⁸ See sGa Karma don grub, et al. 1999:139-140 and 'Jam dbyangs, et al. 1995-1997, 1: 139-140.

Similar to Tshul khriims mthar phyin, he sees no greater point to my academic venture and labels it wordly business. If I am to commit to academic pursuit at all, the motivation should be to help all beings. He would also like me to stay at La phyi as nun and he thinks my fellow students from the university should finance my retreat.

X.2.5. Chu mtsho

Chu mtsho says she is “around 20 years old” but she looks a bit older. She has been at La phyi for three years, living alone in her cabin. She first took ordination vows from gSal byed rin po che down at sKyo brag monastery; she was the only one who took ordination that day.

Chu mtsho then went to Ya chen *chos sgar* for a few months. She undertook this long journey to dKar mdzes *rdzong* to meet mKhan po A khyug.

She then returned to her home area and chose La phyi because she considered life in a monastery a waste of time. Besides, this hermitage has got the special teacher, who is “The Second (sic!) Mi la ras pa”.

She wants to stay at La phyi for the rest of her life. She receives material support from her family and is currently practicing her Preliminaries.

X.3. Renunciation as empowerment

The La phyi meditators often use the supplication *rDo rje 'chang thung ma*, composed by the 15th century bKa' brgyud pa hermit Ban sgar 'jam dpal bzang po in connection with liturgies such as the *'pho ba* or the *sngon 'gro*. At one point, the text declares:

[...] It is said that renunciation is the feet of meditation [...]⁸⁷⁹

Now that I have acknowledged several individual narratives of vocation evolving at La phyi, I shall consider those instances as templates for the exploration of the inner workings of renunciation, understood as a process of total dissolution from lay life and a simultaneous acceptance of a new, strictly religious daily routine.

Tibetan texts like *khrid yig*, *rnam thar*, etc. employ a whole plethora of terms which describe this phenomenon, among which *nges 'byung/spong/bya 'bral/bya btang/zhen log* are the most frequent ones.⁸⁸⁰ Emic definitions of these terms often convey a primarily pessimistic overtone, which stresses rejection and detachment as the explanation of *spong*, “to abandon and eliminate,” would suggest.⁸⁸¹

⁸⁷⁹ [...] *zhen log sgom gyi rkang pa gsungs pa bzhin* [...]. Excerpt taken from the *rDo rje 'chang thung ma* by the 15th/16th century bKa' brgyud pa hermit Ban sgar 'Jam dpal bzang po. See 'Jam dpal bzang po 2004.

⁸⁸⁰ The terms *nges [par] 'byung* and *zhen log* are often used to express sentiments or attitude (i.e. aversion towards *samsāra*). They are used synonymously, while *spong* emphasizes the active aspect of renunciation (see footnote below).

⁸⁸¹ According to the BGT: *spong ba* – *'dor ba dang sel ba* = “to abandon and to eliminate” (Zhang Yisun 1985, 2: 1665, s.v. “*spong ba*”). The BGT describes *zhen pa log pa* (*zhen log*) as being equivalent to *'dod bral ba* = “free from [any] wishes.” (Zhang Yisun 1985, 3: 2402, s.v. “*zhen pa log pa*”). Taken literally, *zhen pa* denotes

Moreover, writings on asceticism frequently present renunciation as one particular act.⁸⁸² Yet the observation of the living Tantric tradition at La phyi, as well as an examination of its literary context results in a much more complex picture.

Firstly, the abandonment of worldly life, expressed in the ritual act of conversion, such as the taking of monastic vows, is merely a foundation for further stages of what is a long and complex process. Next to detachment, the most important feature of renunciation is the adoption of religious discipline. The coexistence of these two contradictory aspects in the life of an ascetic – the negating aspect (rejection/detachment) and the positive aspect (adoption) – mirrors the complexity of the phenomenon of renunciation. Both aspects of renunciation are crucial for the hermitic culture of La phyi.

It should also be noted that the interplay of rejection and adoption is concurrently present in each ascetic act. A diachronic perspective on renunciation is inherent in its very dynamics, but the degrees of renunciation also reflect phases of competency, which will be described below.

In this section, I examine renunciation especially from the position of its first stage, i.e. detachment. The negating and positive aspects are inseparable – renunciates do not reject the world for the sake of denial, but devote themselves entirely to the application of the Buddhist path. The same is true in reversed order – Tshul khrims mthar phyin has said that genuine practice is not possible without detachment. The second, positive aspect of renunciation will be illustrated with descriptions of training carried out at La phyi *sgom grwa*, contained in the next chapter.

Several writings that discuss renunciation in Tibetan societies equate it to taking monastic vows.⁸⁸³ Since this view simplifies the picture of renunciation itself as well as its complex socio-religious implications, I would like to challenge this approach by indicating that taking the vows only initiates what is frequently a life-long process that renunciation actually entails.⁸⁸⁴

“clinging” and *log pa*, “the reverse of.” The term *bya 'bral* expresses a similar yogic concept, since it denotes “giving up [all worldly] actions.” Note that *skyo ba*, mentioned earlier in the context of the origin of the name for the hermitic center of sKyo brag, also expresses the ascetic’s weariness with conditioned existence, which is why it is sometimes used as an equivalent of *nges 'byung*. The definition of *nges 'byung* supplied by the BGT stresses that the latter term concerns both the path and the goal of Tantrism: *kham s gsum btson ra dang 'dra ba nas thar cing mya ngan las 'das pa'i gnas bde bar phyin pa ste/'khor ba'i gnas mtha' dag las thar bar 'dod pa'i sems/ bden bzhi mi rtag sogs bcu drug gi nang gses shig*= “having [recognized that] the three realms [of *samsāra*] are like a prison, having gone to bliss, the place of liberation and enlightenment; wishing to liberate oneself from the entirety of the place of *samsāra*, a category among the sixteen [points], the four truths, impermanence and the like.” (Zhang Yisun 1985, 1: 658, s.v. *nges 'byung*).

⁸⁸² Compare for instance Paper 1999: 54, Cort 1999: 103.

⁸⁸³ See Mills 2003: 69-81; also compare Trungram Gyaltrul 2005: 45.

⁸⁸⁴ For a similar view on renunciation as process, see Mills 2003: 69, 74-75.

As a phenomenon that lies at the heart of hermitism, renunciation is the overarching principle connecting many centuries of Tibetan religious developments and all chapters in this work. In Chapter Four I explained the most important techniques used in today's ethno-religious revival. One of them was employing the past, understood as a strategy to achieve certain goals: to counteract such predicaments as a collective identity-crisis, lack of autonomy, ruptures in cultural continuity, shock of modernization, consumerism and foreign presence. The symbolism and narratives of renunciation define the history of power in Nang chen. It is therefore no coincidence that this specific past is being revived today.

Below I examine the process of renunciation as one of the key strategies of utilizing past as resource. The techniques employed at La phyi all rely on the traditional symbolism of renunciation as relevant for contemporary identity construction, which is why this hermitage can be seen as a neotraditionalist project. I will argue that the success that La phyi enjoys as a project is partially the effect of the skillful re-connection with the hermitic tradition of Khams in general and of sKyo brag and Chab sti in particular.

Both aspects of renunciation, detachment and acceptance of training are said to fulfill two types of benefit (*don gnyis*): one's own benefit (*rang gi don*) as well as the benefit for others (*gzhan gyi don*). Still, this discussion will show that rejection/conversion/detachment, as not only the first but also the most conspicuous step of renunciation, is perceived by a wide social audience. This is why it influences the community around the hermitage more than the positive aspect of renunciation, i.e. the Tantric training, which should remain hidden. One's own benefit arising from renunciation will be discussed in the chapter on the Secret Life.

Since renunciation is such a complex issue, encompassing many psychological, sociological, and cultural aspects, I will limit the present discussion to an outline of those of its traits, which will help to understand the phenomenon of social empowerment of the hermits at La phyi.⁸⁸⁵ I believe that by studying the mechanisms of rejection/detachment and adoption, which lie at the heart of hermitic performance, will at the same time help to explain how it is possible for Tibetan hermits to reconcile the great paradoxes surrounding the Tibetan meditation retreat culture, where the very world a hermit rejects offers him support and empowers him in many ways and ritual isolation triggers the formation of an organized community. I will argue that renunciation constitutes the main technique of empowerment of the La phyi landscape, past and people. The empowerment is both the effect of renunciation and the motive behind its performance since any ritual is both endowed with creative power

⁸⁸⁵ Compare with the discussion on public recognition of Mi la ras pa in Tiso 1989: 266-272.

and at the same time, it is an object of creation. I will also argue that renunciation reactivates traditional networks which have sustained hermits for centuries, and for this reason the performance of renunciation is central to the hermitic revival today.

X.3.1. The renunciation cycle

A closer scrutiny of the hermitic lifestyle in historical narratives, in the case study of La phyi and in many retreat centers I have seen across Khams, reveals that renunciation does not constitute a particular moment in the life of a meditator, rather it merely starts with taking the monastic vows and continues through further stages.

Renunciation is part of a meta-narrative of the life of the Śākyamuni Buddha, who shore off his hair to illustrate his rejection of mundane existence but also of his willingness to enter the path of training, which he then tread until enlightenment. These consecutive stages of detachment and adoption are also clearly reflected in the ascending architecture of La phyi: from Level 0 that accommodates beginners, through Level I where the higher stages of training in a more solitary environment are taking place, up to the legendary Chab sti cave which stands for total abandonment of worldliness and complete embodiment of the ideal put forward by the Tantric Buddhist tradition. The La phyi project offers meditation schooling accompanied by various degrees of detachment from human company: the *sgom grwa* encompasses a large group of beginners, the *sgrub khang* requires a life within a small community in a sealed enclosure, while accomplished *gtum mo* practitioners can continue training in an entirely solitary environment.

Highlighting progression within the landscape where religious training is performed, is well known from the past, especially from the traditional narrative of Mi la ras pa, which stresses the value of place for the construction of ascetic identity. Through projecting this paradigm onto the local landscape, Tshul khrims mthar phyin and his disciples re-install the local landscape to its *gnas* status. This has a profound effect on the whole community around La phyi, even if its hermits create a privileged society, dedicated to the clandestine processes of Tantric transformation. Because their training is expected to ultimately generate liberation and enlightenment, possible “in this body and life,” it will yield benefit for all living beings, i.e. also the lay community around the hermitage. In pre-modern Khams, the anticipation of the final phase of renunciation was vital for the relationship between hermits and their sponsors. At the same time, the expectation of the expert-hermit’s re-connection with society is one of the main factors that behind the support that retreat venues like La phyi receive today.

At this meditation school, Tshul khrim mthar phyin's maturity for social re-connection after the completion of the goal is signaled through the white robe and his physical expansion into the realm of the supernatural. These factors are necessary for venues like La phyi to grow and for the Khams pa hermitic tradition to flourish today, since their folklore appeal is a vital argument for the lay involvement in the revival. This is expressed by Catherine Bell who emphasizes the "circular" nature of ritual:

The purpose of ritualization is to ritualize persons, who deploy schemes of ritualization in order to dominate (shift or nuance) other, nonritualized situations to render them more coherent with the values of the ritualizing schemes and capable of molding perceptions.⁸⁸⁶

Bjørnvig has also called attention to renunciation as a process, terming it "a field of transition" and identifying its different stages.⁸⁸⁷ Below, I will employ my own partition and categorization of the phases of renunciation. I will refer to the stages, which express the increasing scale of ascetic competency, as follows: 1) conversion and rejection/detachment 2) adoption of training (transformation in sustained liminality) 3) re-connection.

Before I discuss the consecutive stages of the renunciation process, one important point should be mentioned. There are not many practitioners able to complete their individual cycle "in this body and life." The Buddhist teachings explain this with the difficulty of the task, and this makes the accomplished expert-hermits all the more valuable. However, the same tradition, solidified by popular narratives of enlightened hermits, also claims that even the quantity of practice (for instance the number of mantras or rituals repeated) will at one point become transformed into quality, i.e. transcendence of *samsāra* and accomplishment of enlightenment. This belief is very significant in that it has prompted laity to support and to acknowledge the ritual significance of their local meditation school, even if most of the hermits inhabiting it are beginners, like in the case of La phyi.

X.3.1.1. Stage one. Conversion and detachment

The start of the ascetic cycle is indicated with rites of passage, which are part of the general framework of the Vinaya code. The conversion through acceptance of monastic ordination is marked with important outer signs of metamorphosis like shoring off one's hair, discarding the layman's or laywoman's clothes and wearing the attire of a monastic. This has not only ritual, but also social importance in that it immediately marks the renunciate as a member of

⁸⁸⁶ Bell 1992: 108.

⁸⁸⁷ Bjørnvig 2007: 114-115.

the religious community, a group traditionally privileged in their role as local leaders and objects of veneration.⁸⁸⁸ Taking ordination at La phyi additionally connotes a promotion in one's status among the monastic community of Yushu TAP, since it signifies a connection to a modern *grub thob*, who has proven that the Tantric path brings results also today, in spite of the crisis that Tibetan religions had to face in recent decades.

The beginner on the ascetic path is expected to reject all *samsāric* activity, language and thought – from sexuality, progeny, economic production, entertainment or adornments, to anything generally classified within “the eight worldly dharmas” (*'jig rten gyi chos brgyad*), i.e. not directed towards the goal of the Tantric tradition. Thus, the general Buddhist ethics of embracing positive actions, paired with the rejection of negative actions (*blang 'dor*), which can also be applied outside the monastic path, is transferred into a discipline that emphasizes austerity, manifested in the extreme lifestyle of the hermit. Tshul khrims mthar phyin says:

If you meditate in your warm house, you think more about your family and other relations. If you really want to practice, you need to give it up and renounce all comfort.

It is not enough to accept the ascetic lifestyle at La phyi; all the constituents of one's previous, lay identity need to be discarded. I was reminded of this by Yon tan chu mtsho, who refuted my personal renunciation efforts linked with my presence at the hermitage on account of my long hair and earrings. This way, the separation from any form of worldly enjoyment, both mental and corporeal constitutes a prerequisite for the training in that it generates space for the construction of a new identity. Thus, the conversion is mainly aimed at abandoning one's old self. This is important since the first step in attaining the goal of Buddhism is primarily described as the complete termination of the ego (Skt. *ātman*, Tib. *bdag*), equated to a root distortion in the perception of reality.

Through the act of conversion, first the habitual self becomes discarded, then, a reconstruction of identity is proposed. This new “I” is based solely on the tradition of the path, so that in the case of Tshul khrims mthar phyin, it articulates the ultimate narratives of liberation and enlightenment. This is why, from the emic point of view, the new identity transcends the personal self.

Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there has been a number of identities one could assume in order to eradicate egotism: that of a pious layman, a monastic, a *sngags pa*, etc; but the teachings of ascetic hermits like Mi la ras pa have regarded them with disdain. In the same

⁸⁸⁸ Compare Goldstein & Tsarong 1985.

fashion, Tshul khrims mthar phyin emphasizes the value of total disassociation from any worldly habits and goals:

If one follows the example of Mi la ras pa, it is easy [to leave everything behind].

You should get rid of your attachment [to your family and possessions]. Both the Buddha and Mi la ras pa said that if you want to reach enlightenment in one life, you have to abandon your possessions.

For this reason, the one version of the *thang ka*-like posters portraying Tshul khrims mthar phyin in his single white robe and red meditation belt, sold across dKye dgu mdo, sKyo brag and Shar mda' describe him as:

Lama Tshul khrims mthar phyin, one who discarded [all] action.⁸⁸⁹

Although the *ras pa* seems unaware of the popularity of these images, they play a significant role in promoting his agency and advertising La phyi *sgom grwa* among future benefactors, potential meditators and occasional disciples.⁸⁹⁰

For Tshul khrims mthar phyin, detachment has traditional value. Not only does an ascetic lifestyle invoke the figure of the great hermit Mi la; it is also an approach that Tshul khrims mthar phyin considers highly valid for the accomplishment of Mahāmudrā:

On the path to the Mahāmudrā, desire and attachment are the most coarse disturbances which also cause other disturbances. For instance, one may want something that one cannot get; as a result, one becomes angry.

Above, I have discussed the traditional view on the value of detachment. But that still does not explain why contemporary men and women of Nang chen *rdzong* and beyond, young and old, are eager to radically change their life and to dedicate themselves entirely to religious discipline, while enduring many austerities. Looking back at the testimonies of vocation from La phyi, the stress on the *bodhi* motivation that brought them to the meditation school is evident; the practitioners report they longed to practice dharma teachings under the guidance of an authentic master. However, the different types of religious incentive (*bodhi*, pragmatic, *karma*-oriented) can and will overlap within individual agencies. Therefore, as Qin observed, there is no need for a “false dichotomy between spiritual and social dimension” in the

⁸⁸⁹ *bya bral ba bla ma tshul khrims mthar phyin.*

⁸⁹⁰ I brought one such “photographic *thang ka*” to La phyi and Tshul khrims mthar phyin was intrigued. When I explained I bought it in sKye dgu mdo, he expressed his distaste and implied it was unnecessary to make such images.

interpretation of such case histories.⁸⁹¹ The disconnection of the religious and the social becomes especially irrelevant in the case of revival of Tibetan Buddhist Tantrism, which advocates the recognition of the non-dual nature of body and mind, self and other, as well as the ultimate unity (*ngo bo gcig pa*) of all phenomena.

In her analysis of the different scholarly views on religious vocation, Qin argues for “a spirituality that is a psycho-physical faculty that occurs always within specific and concrete social situations.”⁸⁹² Therefore, the following paragraphs will focus on the particularities that shape the lives of the people inhabiting Yushu TAP and especially Nang chen *rdzong*, where most of the meditators of La phyi *sgom grwa* come from. I will assert that their *bodhi* aspirations arise simultaneously with other incentives, which are at the same time less apparent and also often involuntary.

X.3.1.1.1. Renunciation as counter-ideology

In the beginning of this discussion, I would again like to recall the often mentioned presentation of revitalization movements as strategies necessary for self-defense, generated in reaction to “stress” a culture is experiencing or has experienced. I have described the trauma of the Maoist period at sKyo brag, Yushu TAP and generally in Tibetan areas, as well as the anxiety of the Deng- and post-Deng years. Given this recent past, the conversion into an ordained person who undergoes the renunciation process, enables one to deal with those traumas that affect both the individual and the society as a whole.

Conversion, understood as the decision to abandon lay life and adopt the discipline of the hermits, allows the practitioner to focus on the training alone, without the distractions of social obligations, including those connected to living in a monastery. The act of conversion should lead to total detachment from worldly goals, described as a catalyst for the swift deliverance from the unbearable suffering of *samsāra* for the benefit of all. Like Mi la ras pa, who attained liberation and enlightenment “in this body and life,” Tshul khriims mthar phyin propagates the urgency for conversion:

Renunciation (*spong ba*) is the quick path! It allows you to achieve the results within one lifetime. If you only meditate sometimes, but do not [make the big step to] leave everything behind, you should not expect quick results.

[...] In order to be able to benefit beings, you have to go into retreat!

⁸⁹¹ See Qin (2000: 92) who defines spirituality in this manner: “[it is] not an essential state but rather a process with an intentionality. It consists of a mental tendency, which can be termed an urge, an aspiration, a yearning, as well of a physical act, which can be termed practice, persistence and discipline.”

⁸⁹² Qin 2000: 89-92.

To describe the intensity of the pain in the *samsāra* and the lack of possibility to redeem oneself without proper training, Buddhist scriptures, also those used at Tshul khrim mthar phyin's meditation school speak of "iron shackles" (*lcags sgrog*) of ego-clinging and compare the joys of everyday life with "the executioner's banquet on the way to the execution ground" (*gsod sar khrid pa'i gshed ma'i dga' ston*). Other passages describe "the prison of the world" (*srid pa'i btson ra*) while emphasizing the freedom (*thar pa*) and happiness (*bde ba*) resulting from renunciation.⁸⁹³ In the case of La phyi, the traditional metaphors of enslavement that describe the human condition, contained in the language of rituals reiterated everyday, reflect the situation of the Tibetan inhabitants of Yushu TAP and their dependency on the policies made in the People's Republic of China.

Consequently, the conversion does not only serve as the first step to liberation from the prison of *samsāra*, since the world the meditators live in is not an abstract sphere of suffering, but it represents Khams, Yushu TAP, Nang chen *rdzong* and especially one's own locality like sKyo brag, Rab shis, Kha cham or Shar mda'.

In the past, these areas were contained in the Tibetan kingdom of Nang chen, which came under the jurisdiction of the PRC in 1950. Before that time, Nang chen had been defeated by other foreign powers, but the foreign authority did not attempt to alter the indigenous social and cultural values, which did occur under the rule of the PRC from 1950.

Today, even if the state has eased its grip on its minorities, the collective memory of aggression, the imposed, irreversible changes in the local balance of power and in the economy, as well as the urgency for self-determination (recently expressed in the post-Olympic revolt taking place across Khams and the TAR) are still present in the memory of the locals. These strong sentiments of dissent are not allowed to be expressed in a direct manner, which is why there is a need for new and inconspicuous channels of their articulation.

One of the most effective ways to convey the accumulated, collective resentment is renunciation. The garb of the Tibetan ascetic is a clear sign of denial, which at the same time is not only tolerated by the authorities, but also traditionally supported by the society. This is why I argue that the mass conversions of monks and nuns who populate the different *chos sgar* and *ri khrod* across Eastern Tibet bear traces of a popular revolt. The examples of La phyi and other, similar centers show how distinctly religious, renunciative movements can develop to embrace features of social activism. As Sallie B. King expressed it:

⁸⁹³ For the language of renunciation and the quotes from the scriptures used in the course of the training, see above in Chapter Eleven of this thesis.

Thus where ideology has been a particular source of suffering, as for Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, Buddhist self-negation is particularly clearly espoused.⁸⁹⁴

When I was visiting gSer rta bla rung sgar in 2007, I was reminded that the authorities refer to its residents as “the red-robed army;” the government crackdown on the center had been so traumatic that my interviewers refused to talk about it. Similarly, even if the conversions of the La phyi meditators are not outwardly political in nature, they can be seen as statements of dissent against the political system and ethnic pride *vis-à-vis* the instrumentalization of Tibetans as a minority.

When a lay woman accepts monastic vows and ascetic discipline at La phyi, she does so to achieve liberation “in this body and life,” and this conversion also reveals a strong sense of autonomy in choosing a lifestyle which is not only exclusively Tibetan, but also reflects the unique yogic heritage of sKyo brag and Nang chen. The narratives of vocation quoted above have obviously and intentionally been modeled after the narrative of Tshul khrim mthar phyin. The La phyi guru restores the continuity with the local religious tradition through the re-emphasis on the Mi la ras pa mythos and the sKyo brag yogic legends as well as through the emulation of his own master Karma nor bu. But what is more, the individual narratives of vocation of the La phyi hermits are modeled against the grand narrative of the People’s Republic of China with its many nationalities, whose fate is subordinated to the policies of the state. Becoming a hermitess in the sphere of local power is a choice which emphasizes individual autonomy, in a stark contrast to the meta-context of social and historical roles attributed to minorities by the state.

Hence, the conversion is an effective way out of the imposed identity of the *minzu*. For a new convert, the ceremony marking the initiation into the monastic *sangha* becomes a statement of departure into the world of indigenous Buddhist tradition, which allows them to assume an unambiguously Tibetan role, recognizable at first sight. The formal act of detachment requires accepting restrictions in individual expression and the new hermit adopts the uniform, hermaphrodite identity of a Tibetan Buddhist monk or a nun.⁸⁹⁵ The typical maroon-red clothing and a shaved head is a clear, unanimously accepted sign of what Hannah Havnevik terms a “role blockage” according to the writings of Ingrid Rudie. A “role blockage” constitutes a life choice which renders the acceptance of other social identities

⁸⁹⁴ King 1996: 429.

⁸⁹⁵ For “monastic androgyny” see Makley 2005. Compare also Salgado 1997: 13.

impossible.⁸⁹⁶ In this manner, an individual turns into a vessel of indigenous tradition *vis-à-vis* the Chinese colonial practice. What is more, when a rural woman from sKyo brag becomes a “woman of virtue” (*dge ma*), it merely marks the beginning of her empowerment; the ethos of a renunciate *de facto* secures her in the privileged role of a monastic, while her social and ritual status is on the rise.

Even if “role-blockage” radically limits the range of lifestyle choices, from monastery life to the different types of isolated mediation training, it strongly emphasizes one’s conformity with the new role – a life dedicated totally to the accomplishment of Tantric tradition. Referring to the definition of Buddhist asceticism quoted in the Introduction – asceticism not only closes certain modes of action, but also promotes the development of other ones through a particular kind of training.⁸⁹⁷ Therefore, renunciation becomes a particularly affirmative practice, and as described later in this analysis, its positive aspect is crucial for the empowerment of hermits in the final stage of the renunciation cycle.

To the inhabitants of sKyo brag, the officially assigned roles of the *minzu* and the general function of the citizens of the PRC are both objectionable and unrealistic. Because on top of this, their own traditional way of life was uprooted, the literature on the ethno-religious revival in the Tibetan areas of China argues for a collective “identity crisis.” The success of the La phyi project as well as that of other hermitages shows that renunciation is an effective response to this crisis.

Most of my informants admitted that their choice of La phyi was motivated by the closeness to its founder. Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s agency as well as the charisma flowing from the traditional symbols he uses are crucial factors in the development of the meditation school. Not only does he point to the existence of a clear goal, which promises resolution of all individual and collective dilemmas, he is also the one who gives precise directions on how to reach this objective. But most of all, since he is seen as the embodiment of accomplishment, he demonstrates that attaining liberation and enlightenment is realistic even in the modern, secularized landscape of post-Deng Kham, among the many social tensions that are a consequence of ongoing political suppression.

What is more, Tshul khrims mthar phyin continues the lifestyle and activity of his guru, Karma nor bu, whose dedication to the path remained pure and undamaged even in the most difficult time of the Cultural Revolution and who showed that Buddhist practice can be

⁸⁹⁶ Quoted by Havnevik (1994: 263), although unfortunately more precise data is not given. For role-blockage as a modern life-choice, see current chapter.

⁸⁹⁷ Mishra 1987: 23.

continued in one's mind even when its outward display is banned. Thus, Tshul khrims mthar phyin offers his disciples – both the meditators and their lay supporters – his version of the past of Khams in general and sKyo brag in particular. Through his presentation of the Tantric transmission as valid, unbroken and untainted by violence and humiliation as if the dramatic and overriding changes had never occurred, Tshul khrims mthar phyin also offers his disciples a sense of belonging to a coherent structure of the local tradition.⁸⁹⁸

For all the reliance on the guru, who represents an ideal that should become totally embraced by the trainees, the Buddhist path emphasizes self-cultivation and independence. The training at La phyi aims at developing practitioners to a stage where they are able to rely on their previous preparation alone and continue their life in solitary retreat, seen as the highest form of practice, followed by the re-connection with society. This system of fostering independence and autonomous agency can be exceptionally enticing for people living under foreign rule, especially for the minorities of the PRC. As Qin has pointed out, not only does China instrumentalize its minority ethnic groups, but also all of its citizens who are expected to contribute to the nationalist and socialist goals, as they become “mechanical parts of the state's political enterprise.”⁸⁹⁹

The many conversions at La phyi *sgom grwa* also point to the fact that renunciation has apparently become one of the indigenous reactions to modernity, introduced by the Chinese government and its representatives across Khams. Firstly, modernization is a threat to the time-honored local identities. It has caused a rapid and irreversible departure from a traditional society, where religion played a vital and constructive role as the basis for all social interaction.⁹⁰⁰ In the case of sKyo brag and Chab sti, I have already presented how the greatest challenge of the Chinese Communist expansion into their territory was the “de-cosmologization,” which stripped the venues of their cosmological value. After 1980, there were exemplary acts of renunciation carried out by the highest religious authorities like gSal byed, who renewed his vows and settled in retreat, and Tshul khrims mthar phyin, who rejected his family life and government post to transform into a modern embodiment of Mi la ras pa. These individual efforts of conversion and detachment were necessary to recreate the traditional social paradigms and to restore the ritual status of the local *gnas*, since the advent of modernity had irrevocably changed the landscape.

⁸⁹⁸ For the sense of belonging as one of the driving forces in the Chinese Buddhist revival today, compare Qin (2000).

⁸⁹⁹ Qin 2000: 72.

⁹⁰⁰ Bellah 1965: 178.

As George Bond put it: “Modernization, whatever else it involved, is always a moral and religious problem.”⁹⁰¹ Secularization has also jeopardized the social role that Buddhist institutions played over centuries. The revival and development of the sKyo brag monastic-hermitic complex, along with La phyi as its remote satellite is a response to the enforced secularization of authority at a locality where ritual and temporal power was united for many centuries. The individual cases of renunciation at La phyi could be seen as a moral opposition against the atrophy of old values, and the uncompromising way of life maintains the ethnic, historical and religious uniqueness of the sKyo brag area.

In fact, neotraditionalism articulated by the many conversions taking place at La phyi and within similar venues is also an indigenous response to consumerism. This phenomenon, which appeared in the context of colonialism during the time of other waves of Buddhist revival across Asia, was often branded as immoral and associated with foreign domination; in 19th-century Sri Lanka, the traditional elite preached the “return to the recluse ideal” in order to counteract the indulgence paired with the expansion of a foreign culture.⁹⁰² Similarly, Jordan Paper has pointed out that the great popularity of monasticism in Taiwan is a reaction to “contemporary rampant capitalism.”⁹⁰³

Of course, the situation of the community at Nang chen *rdzong* in terms of their access to consumption of goods is limited; with little or no access to education, the people are rarely in the position to step out of the pastoralist sector and earn cash money that they could spend. Even the local entrepreneurs who run the few shops and restaurants in sKyo brag do not become wealthy – a solar panel and the rare TV set are the most luxurious consumer goods in the village. However, this does not alter the firm judgment of the local religious leaders, Tshul khirms mthar phyin, A bstan phun tshogs and gSal dga’, who believe that even aspiring for accumulating riches is a serious mistake. The three revivalists lead ascetic lives that confirm the gravity of this conviction.

In the next few lines I would like to comment on the vocations of the La phyi nuns in the context of the special social problematic concerning women renunciates. What does it mean today when rural Khams pa women decide to give up *samsāra* and enter the path of religious training? Qin has commented on the vocation of the nuns from her case study to point out that exit from lay life equals “an escape from socially prescribed gender roles.”⁹⁰⁴ I suppose that

⁹⁰¹ Bellah 1991: 64 quoted in Bond 1992: 11-12.

⁹⁰² Bellah 1965: 121-3.

⁹⁰³ Paper 1999: 49.

⁹⁰⁴ Qin 2000: 46.

at La phyi, breaking out of the androcentric structures of traditional Tibetan society constitutes one of the reasons for choosing a religious career, although not one of my informants was explicit about this.⁹⁰⁵

In the light of the lack of career prospects, the La phyi nuns followed the most convincing and perhaps most accessible offer on their local market of identities and values. However, their vocations could also be seen as a withdrawal from the challenges they face as females in modern-day Khams. As Tshul khri mthar phyin observed, many of them have “small minds,” which could denote that illiterate rural women from impoverished regions find coping with modernity a compelling task and might easily be overwhelmed by the new technologies, the competitive economy, the pace of life in urban areas, the challenges of the workplace, as well as with the politicization of many spheres of life in the PRC. Moreover, the increased mobility and tourism requires that rural women interact with more people and in a different manner than ever before, a task for which they are not prepared and which they often do not enjoy.⁹⁰⁶

Another factor is the crisis of the traditional Tibetan family. I noticed that at least in the more urban areas of Eastern Tibet like sKye dgu mdo, which plays a significant role in sponsorship and promotion of many hermitages, including La phyi *sgom grwa*, whatever has traditionally connected the Tibetan family, often proves to be insufficient in today’s reality with its new economic challenges, lifestyles and role models supplied by the ever-present Chinese television and Han migrant workers. As a result, divorce and infidelity are becoming more frequent also among the Tibetan community, which destabilizes family life as the basis for social relations, deracinating personal roots and thus, a coherent identity. In the face of all this, the Khams pa woman is more vulnerable than the man. Hence, the rejection of all worldliness becomes a path chosen frequently to escape these dilemmas.

X.3.1.1.2. Renunciation as performance

Renunciation is not restricted to a process of self-transformation; from the moment of conversion, through the training in liminality to the closing of the cycle, all of its phases include and influence others. This does not only occur within the Buddhist context of *bodhicitta*, which prompts the practitioner to embrace the benefit of all sentient beings –

⁹⁰⁵ However, outside the immediate context of my case study, I was informed by bSod nams, an educated laywoman from sDe dge, who works for a local NGO and is a devout Buddhist: “People say that many nuns in the dKar mdzes area (encompassing Ya chen and gSer rta) take vows because agricultural work there is very difficult due to the barren or non-arable land and a renunciate life choice still seems easier.”

⁹⁰⁶ During my nearly six months in Khams, I was often struck by the insecurity of young unmarried women and girls in relation to strangers, even if they were also females.

renunciation also has real social impact. The way how the power of an individual conversion constitutes a public statement and as such also inspires other individuals was discussed above, but how does this life choice affect the world outside the hermitage throughout the course of the highly clandestine training?⁹⁰⁷

Gavin Flood argues that asceticism should be seen as a public performance in the sense of acting out the recollection of tradition by means of the body.⁹⁰⁸ However, it is also true that no matter how clandestine a practice is, it is still performed, and that places it in a broader realm of culture shared and supported by many:

Ascetic acts performed within the privacy of a cell or forest are nevertheless still public in the sense that they participate in and are given sanction by the wider community and tradition. [...] Through performing asceticism the ascetic is performing tradition, and the performance of tradition is a public affair.⁹⁰⁹

Of course, as also Flood suggests, connecting ascetic practice to performance denotes emphasizing its status as ritual.⁹¹⁰ And since ritual is always somehow linked to power, Flood also supposes that the incentive behind an act of conversion is the craving for power in any or in all the senses of this term: control over one's passions, self-autonomy, the power of self-eradication, mystical power or the power to resonate in society.⁹¹¹

At La phyi, every power strategy used in order to draw and direct new members and donors is rooted in renunciation. The specific past that is invoked are the histories of Mi la ras pa, Karma nor bu, the sKyo brag and Nang chen hermits. This past is the language of argument against the defamation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that took place during the Maoist era and against the disadvantaged position of China's minorities who are confronted with the urgency to constantly prove the value of their cultures.

The architecture of the Chab sti *gnas* is adapted to the needs of the meditation school; as such, it is devoted entirely to the progressive didactics of renunciation. This can be interpreted as a tactic to ritually colonize the recently secularized or even "de-cosmologized" area and transform it into a zone of power. Thus, in many ways, La phyi is independent from state control, and its community receives a unique status of an alternative society, guided by its

⁹⁰⁷ Compare Goldstein & Tsarong 1985: 25-28.

⁹⁰⁸ Flood 2004: 4-8.

⁹⁰⁹ Flood 2004: 7.

⁹¹⁰ Flood 2004: 7.

⁹¹¹ Flood 2004: 213.

own rules, which are directed toward a growing experience of autonomy and freedom resulting from detachment.⁹¹²

In spite of the isolation and in the course of all the hidden phases of the practice, the acts of conversion and the performance of the acknowledged Tantric culture, renunciates enter a public arena and thus, develop a decidedly active social role. In the case of La phyi, performing renunciation is a powerful tool to awaken the past. This resonates into the public sphere, where the agencies of Tshul khriims mthar phyin and his disciples develop into identity negotiation, especially as a promotion of the local and ethnic uniqueness.⁹¹³

Thus, the radical “role-blockage” again receives an affirmative function since it has the power to inspire the emergence of other, historically interdependent and indisputably Tibetan identities: i.e. where there is a hermit, there is also the pious villager who receives a chance to collect merit or to seek advice; there are benefactors often connected with local secular authority; and finally, there are idealists who will want to follow the hermit’s example. That way, the exclusivist act of conversion becomes inclusivist, as it awakens entire networks that have traditionally supported yogins, their hermitages, practices and lineages.

This is how Tibetan hermitism offers a resolution to another great paradox. As demonstrated with the example of Tshul khriims mthar phyin, even if he has discarded all form of social ties that are not part of religious discourse, or precisely because of this rejection, his family, neighbors, local authorities were transformed into networks supporting him on the path to liberation and enlightenment, but also in the phase of re-connection – these networks supported the development of his meditation school.

Hence, even the most isolated hermits are never really alone. Firstly, what they bring into the seclusion is their specific social, historical and cultural conditioning, together with their former identity and the narratives that have shaped their lives until that moment, be they sacred or ordinary. Moreover, in the moment of conversion, they cannot afford to burn all bridges behind them; they will necessarily rely on the assistance of two types of resource networks. The first such network is part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (*chos*) and includes the transmissions of a specific school (*chos lugs*), lineage (*brgyud*), the instructions and example of one’s guru, the Tantric apparatus (*sgrub thabs/nyams len*), the cosmology (buddhas and *bodhisattvas*), and local sacred ground that also includes the monastery and its authorities. If practitioners are less advanced in meditation, they will also require the support of the community in a *sgom grwa* and the physical presence of a qualified instructor. These

⁹¹² The analysis of La phyi as a utopian society will follow later in this chapter.

⁹¹³ For a religious performance as identity negotiation in Eastern Tibet also see Schrempf 2002.

networks are the resources that a practitioner should cultivate until their transcendence, when they become tools for social and ritual action. This is why I term them transcendental or ritual- resource networks.

An interesting development has occurred in connection with the second type of hermitic resource networks, which belong to the sphere of the mundane (i.e. *saṃsāra*, Tib. *'khor ba*).⁹¹⁴ Even if these networks are related to the cultures that the hermit should abandon, the representatives of the networks will be happy to support individuals who dedicate their lives to the performance of the memory of the indigenous tradition also on the behalf of society. This way, the hermit's cognitive and physical dissolution from the mundane world will be justified and explained in the traditional Tantric rhetoric of secrecy. The example of the La phyi meditators shows that their families and local laity are not only willing to supply them with the conditions to practice, but most of all, they empower the retreatants to reaffirm the validity of Tibetan civilization on their behalf. The hidden life thus becomes a public statement and a strong voice in the negotiation of ethnic identity already in the case of beginner hermits.

There are many great differences between an apprentice-hermit and an expert, but the reasoning above generally holds true for the novices as well. Perhaps the only difference between the skilled hermit and a trainee would lie in the scale and variety of the support. This is evident in the example of our hermitage, where even beginners receive the assistance of their families in building a meditation cabin and collecting provisions. Hence, it must be said that both ritual and social empowerment is something that accompanies the Tibetan hermit from the very beginning.

Since this empowerment is the accreditation to restore the connection with the past and landscape as well as to reinstall the value of indigenous culture today, it inspires many lay people to contribute to the La phyi project as benefactors, disciples, pilgrims and well-wishers. This explains both the growing infrastructure in a venue that emphasizes detachment and isolation, as well as the dimensions of the new hermitic movement.⁹¹⁵

With the last stage of re-connection, renunciation augments still further into the wider social realm as the accomplished hermit develops activity (*'phrin las*) for the benefit of others (*gzhan gyi don*).⁹¹⁶

⁹¹⁴ See below.

⁹¹⁵ Also compare Qin (2000: 48) where the author cites earlier findings by Ortner (1978): the latter scholar argues that renunciation among the Sherpas is the key to social empowerment.

⁹¹⁶ See below for the discussion of the re-connection phase of the hermitic cycle of renunciation.

X.3.1.2. Stage two. The training

As the cycle continues and meditators enter the phase of liminality to begin their schooling, the support of the lay community also focuses on the affirmative aspect of renunciation practice, since detachment alone is not enough to produce a Tantric expert.

What is more, Buddhist scriptures often emphasize that renunciation should not be restricted to behavior, and that it is necessary that renunciation reaches the deeper levels of the psyche. Consequently, the initialization of the training stage marks the beginning of a transformation process, in which the body of the hermit becomes an instrument for “the internalization of tradition,” which lies at the core of the definition of the ascetic self according to Flood.⁹¹⁷ In the introduction to his important work on asceticism, Flood explains that adepts shape their lives in accordance to the religious convention established in the past. Adapting tradition for identity construction occurs through the eradication of the self, but also paradoxically, by “the affirmation of will in ascetic performance such as weakening the body.”⁹¹⁸

This is quite relevant for the observation of our La phyi case, since according to the Buddhist tradition, the goal of liberation (*thar pa*) implies the absence of the self (*bdag med pa*). However, spiritual accomplishment is less a result of a pessimistic or even nihilistic rejection of the world, than an acceptance of new, tradition-specific rules of conduct (*spyod pa*) as well as mental exercise – meditation (*sgom pa*) reflection (*sems pa*) and view (*lta ba*).⁹¹⁹ The La phyi hermits, living in austere conditions, apply ascetic behaviors such as sleeping in meditation posture, fasting and manipulated breathing,⁹²⁰ but it is the cognitive conditioning that I believe best explains why the conversion and detachment are positioned at the beginning of the cycle of renunciation.

As described below in the discussion of the La phyi curriculum, beginners start their meditation training by contemplating *blo ldog rnams bzhi*, “the four [basic thoughts which] turn the mind away [from *samsāra*].” The very wording of this set of contemplative instructions points to the importance of ending certain habits before one can become ready for the acquisition of new values and behaviors. For a constructive process to begin, practitioners focus on what is accessible to them in the cognitive sense, i.e. the world as they know it, for *nirvāṇa* is still in the realm of the unknown. Thus, by contemplating the faults of conditioned

⁹¹⁷ Flood 2004.

⁹¹⁸ Flood 2004: ix.

⁹¹⁹ The specific curriculum at La phyi will be mentioned below.

⁹²⁰ This will be explained in the next chapter in connection with the meditation practices performed at La phyi.

existence, one should be ready to discard *samsāra*, which axiologically speaking, will create the necessary space for new priorities. This way, the first step in renunciation becomes a cognitive strategy in the classical manner of *upāyakaśālyā*, which is aimed at drawing nearer to an experience that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

The training phase is the crucial time reserved for psycho-physical transformation and its methods will be discussed in detail in one of the sections of Secret Life.

X.3.1.3. Stage three. Re-connection: closing the cycle

The final step of the renunciation cycle is accomplishment,⁹²¹ understood as the development of ritual power as described in Buddhist scriptures.⁹²²

There are several kinds of power that a hermit is expected to develop in the course of the practice: moral power, proficiency in meditation, supernatural powers, ritual expertise to invoke the presence of enlightened energies, etc. All of these types of proficiency are expected to appear at the time when the renunciation cycle is completed. Recognizing the signs of power has been common knowledge across Tibetan societies, and I believe that the anticipation of a re-connection with society has proven to be crucial for the survival of hermitic lineages and practices over the centuries.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the signs of accomplishment must necessarily be confirmed by an authority, preferably one's root guru, who will then bestow his/her permission upon the newly recognized accomplisher or will request him/her to continue the lineage by granting empowerment and formal instructions. This recognition is crucial for expert-hermits to re-connect with the society in a formal manner, by means of the lineage-specific rituals; it is not always essential for his influence on the local lay folk.⁹²³

The different powers are developed in connection with the "transcendental" resource networks.⁹²⁴ The individual self (*bdag*) becomes eradicated, and instead, the expert's body, speech and mind become "intextuated" with the content of these traditional ritual networks. At that moment, the function of the resources is transformed: from aids for identity

⁹²¹ Except for liberation and enlightenment, there are different stages of accomplishment in Buddhism, whose descriptions depend on the specific school and lineage. I do not consider these differences relevant for my case study – for the local people, "a saint is a saint" (commonly referred to as *grub thob*), only if he only can tame his body and mind, leads a pious life and is able to perform miracles.

⁹²² There are also quantitative achievements, like the number of years spent in seclusion or repetitions of practices or mantras. The *rnam thar* of famous masters are full of records of absolved numbers of practices, repetitions of mantras and specific retreats. Moreover, there exist honorific titles, which point to a large number of accomplished mantra repetitions, such as the honorary designation *mañi ba*.

⁹²³ See footnote 1020 in Chapter Twelve where I explain the weight of formal legitimation by religious authorities by bringing up an example of another contemporary hermit, lama rDo rgyal.

⁹²⁴ See earlier in this section.

reconstruction, they turn into tools for re-connection with the society. In this sense, the “transcendental” resource networks become transcended themselves. This is reflected in the classical metaphor of *saṃsāra* as a river and *dharma* as the boat, which one disposes of when reaching the shore of liberation.

When expert-hermits are liberated (*thar pa*) from the need to rely on others, they become free to perform activity (*'phrin las*) for the benefit of all. This means that detachment results in transcending worldly resource networks as well.

Before I first had the chance to meet Tshul khrims mthar phyin, I was warned not to ask questions concerning his personal life, since he was “beyond that.” This is what I imply when I argue that experts outstep their prior conditioning (family, personal history, etc.) and the necessity for support (provisions, shelter). In his solitary period in the mountains of Chab sti, Tshul khrims mthar phyin claimed sole reliance on his ritual skill like the *bcud len* practice that allows one to survive for longer periods of time without nourishment; as a *gtum mo* accomplisher, he is credited with the capacity to endure cold weather without the need for warm clothes.

The different forms of empowerment are associated with the yogin from the first moment of conversion; the scale and variety of these types of empowerment reach their momentum at the ultimate stage of accomplishment. As for the specific social empowerment, similar to many Ris med masters, including Karma nor bu, Tshul khrims mthar phyin is a “self-made man,” who could not rely on the privileges stemming from a high ritual status he was granted at birth. Hence, social endorsement was much more apparent in his case. He began his religious career as one of the many middle-aged men across Khams, who took monastic vows in the course of the religious revival, but through the radicalism of his life choice, Tshul khrims mthar phyin was the only one who developed into “The Third Mi la ras pa.”

But why do so many people adopt this radical lifestyle today, and how do ordinary hermits gain a special status and support for their practice? The key factor is the availability of living expert-hermits, who guarantee the effectivity of the Tantric training today. The very factor which legitimizes their power is the capability of demonstrating the perfection of renunciation with physical signs (*rtags*), whose supernatural character is accepted as real.

As illustrated in the example of powers attributed to Tshul khrims mthar phyin, these signs are frequently communicated through the landscape; to be more precise, according to the emic view, the hermit's dissolution of the boundaries between his body and the natural environment enables him to control the elements both inside and outside of the body.

The signs of accomplishment are moreover always contextualized within the locally relevant ritual narratives. Depending on the specific Tantric school and practice, they will include extracting gTer, melting snow with body heat, total abstinence from food, halting the breath, floating in the air, leaving hand-and footprints in solid stone, etc. This way, the body of the expert-hermit like Tshul khrims mthar phyin comes to articulate the cosmological features of the landscape and his specific ritual tradition.⁹²⁵ Notably, even if Tantric experts dwell in remote areas, the show of yogic prowess takes place before a wide audience comprised of all those who identify with the traditional Tibetan culture.

This display of power is additionally important in the context of the ethnic-religious revival. Masters like Karma nor bu, whose bodies served as vehicles for recalling tradition, were able to survive the brutality of the Maoist period and pass on the knowledge of what I term Tantric networks of transcendence to worthy disciples like Tshul khrims mthar phyin or gSal dga', who were capable of internalizing tradition.⁹²⁶ However, because even the most precise memory does not have the power to bring back the past, history is an important resource for creativity in the reconstruction of cultures.⁹²⁷ That means that old symbols can acquire additional meanings; such is the general trait of all religious traditions passed down through generations as time passes and societies and cultures change.⁹²⁸ This is connected to a definition of a ritual according to Bell, who states that it will always be ambiguous enough to accommodate new meanings.⁹²⁹ This has already been noted in the context of the Tibetan Buddhist revival by Epstein and Wenbin, as well as by Schrempf.⁹³⁰ All of these scholars emphasize that since historical and social truths are both implanted in and emanate from the ritual process, ritual both relies on past legacy and it creates and gains new meanings every time it is performed. For this reason, both transcendental resource networks as well as wordly networks which are reconstructed to support the contemporary Khams pa hermits, will allow for a reinterpretation.

After the violent attempts to eradicate any signs of the memory of tradition, the availability and effectivity of the two types of resource networks for hermitic practice cannot be taken for granted. Due to their identity-protecting function, the networks overlap and arise simultaneously: the ritual networks at sKyo brag could not have been rebuilt without the

⁹²⁵ For a discussion of the signs of ascetic accomplishment manifested in the body of Mi la ras pa, especially at the original La phyi, see Tiso 1989: 210-215.

⁹²⁶ Compare Germano 1998: 53.

⁹²⁷ See Flood 2004: 9 and Appadurai 1981.

⁹²⁸ Bond 1992: 3.

⁹²⁹ Bell 1992; also see Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 122.

⁹³⁰ Epstein & Wenbin 1998: 122 and Schrempf 2002: 168-169.

efforts of pious sponsors, local Party authorities or individuals who wished to become ordained (this last example represents the ultimate mode in which the mundane networks can support the ritual ones). At the center of these agencies and influences was the expert-hermit gSal dga', who later inspired another, even more charismatic master, Tshul khrims mthar phyin. Through their perfection of renunciation they could gain mastery of the ritual networks and re-connect the inter-reliant systems of lay and religious cultures, which indicates that at the moment of accomplishment, the hermit is capable of resolving antitheses also today.⁹³¹

The re-connection with the broader society can begin on the basis of total access to transformation and convergence of both types of networks; ritual becomes a tool to reach out to all sentient beings (*so so'i skye bo*). On account of the understanding that “*saṃsāra* is inseparable [from the ultimate] bliss [of *nirvāṇa*]” (*'khor bde dbyer med*), the expert-hermit is empowered to represent both. On his return to society, he may not necessarily alter his lifestyle like Tshul khrims mthar phyin, who remained in the mountains, but his functions within the community will always change.

As experts end their social inertia, often at the request of potential disciples or colleagues, they will act “effortlessly” (*rtsol dang bral*) and “spontaneously” (*lhun grub*) as expressions of collective benefit (which is why they may retain the designation *bya bral ba*); but their identity will not rely on their social function. With accomplished hermits, identity construction relies on the tradition they internalized – in Tshul khrims mthar phyin's case this tradition is the ascetic discipline of the 'Ba' rom and Karma pa schools and the paradigms set by his guru. Thus, Tshul khrims mthar phyin could achieve a high religious status, through which he was be able to re-negotiate the terms of his re-connection with the world. This re-connection was carried out within the traditional ritual framework, and Tshul khrims mthar phyin became a “field of merit,” local *shaman* and Tantric guru. Centering all the dissipated forces and diverse identities of old sKyo brag, Tshul khrims mthar phyin provided them with a location as “place-memory,” which could accommodate the contemporary needs for an ethnic and religious revival.

X.3.1.3.1. The *gtum mo* body of experience

Perceiving the body as a cultural construct beyond its mere biological reality is common in modern anthropology; and this is valid especially in the Buddhist context.⁹³² Writers like Qin

⁹³¹ The agency of charismatic teachers is crucial also according to Kapstein (1998: 56-57). Compare Powers 1992: 74-76.

⁹³² Bell 1992: 94.

emphasize the absence of body-mind dualism in the framework of renunciation and mysticism.⁹³³ While analyzing the social and ritual empowerment of the Chab sti saint, it is therefore relevant to pose the question of how the cultural experience of the body affect the hermit's physical experience of his own body and of the environment.⁹³⁴

Like all six of Nāro pa's yogas, the Inner Heat is understood as a corporeal practice, exploiting the subtle energies and channels (*rtsa rlung*) of the body, synchronized with the speech (*ngag*) and mind (*vid*).⁹³⁵ The Path of Means (*thabs lam*) theory maintains that the manipulation of any of these constituents will bring about a transformation of the whole human complex. Hence, through working with the inner energies, the yogin experiences the results also on the mental level – as a state of bliss.

This state is attained in the following manner: when the entire *prāna* is propelled into the central channel (Skt. *avadhūti*, Tib. *rtsa dbu ma*), the subjective and *karmic* reality normally experienced through the side channels of *lalanā* (*rkyang ma*) and *rasanā* (*ro ma*) is transformed into non-dual perception. The mundane winds become energy of primordial wisdom (*ye shes kyi rlung*). This leads to the experience of “four types of delight” (*dga' ba bzhi*), which develop into the ultimate state of the “great [non-dual] bliss” (Skt. *mahāsukha*, Tib. *bde ba chen po*) and the simultaneous attainment of the mind's original nature.⁹³⁶ In order to accomplish the state of great bliss, the yogin applies special mental images, particular body postures, mantras, syllables and sophisticated breathing techniques, at which the “blissful heat of *gtum mo*” (*gtum mo'i bde drod*) blazes forth. The generation of heat is defined both as the consumption of impurities and worldly desires, and as Tshul khrims mthar phyin informed me, it is the sign of the blessing of one's guru combined with one's devotion.⁹³⁷

It seems that the constant sensation of bliss and warmth, the physical indications of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's *gtum mo* proficiency do not only constitute a self-perceived mind-body construct. According to his statement, modeled after the narratives of earlier expert-hermits, the totality of this experience embraces the environment, which reacts through melted snow

⁹³³ Qin 2000: 368-377.

⁹³⁴ Qin 2000.

⁹³⁵ For the absolute secrecy surrounding these practices, it would be more logical to include the discussion on the *gtum mo* into the chapter discussing the “secret life” of the La phyi hermitage. However, for the sake of fluency in our analysis of the final stage of renunciation and because of the shifting importance of the traditional signs of re-connection, I have decided to incorporate it here.

⁹³⁶ Ringu Tulku 1982: 40-41.

⁹³⁷ See Ringu Tulku 1982: 41; Kong sprul, et al. 2005: 33. According to Tshul khrims mthar phyin, the fire is the sign of the guru's blessing. For a detailed example of a *gtum mo-sāadhanā* and its effects see Powers 2007: 353-4.

and the imprint of one's hand in solid stone. From the moment of its transformation, the ascetic experiences spontaneous transcendence of the individual self and reaches out to the outside world, where the environment interacts with the yogin and empowers him. On the symbolic level, this feat is represented by the taming of natural forces and sexual union between *Mi la ras pa* and the female mountain deity *Tshe ring ma* at the original *La phyi*.

Qin defines mystical experience as a "psychophysical process," but in Tshul khrim mthar phyin's case, I would necessarily add that this process also includes a historical dimension.⁹³⁸ Tshul khrim mthar phyin's body is a medium that moves through time, as his personal past reflects the radical changes that occurred in Yushu TAP since the arrival of Chinese communists: the abolishment of the Nang chen socio-political system, the collectivization, the 1958 rebellion, the closing of religious institutions, the Cultural Revolution and the current revival.

As the Chinese government first aimed its "civilizing projects" at uprooting the traditional way of life, Tibetan bodies became subjectified, labeled as "backward" and "underdeveloped." Thus, since the 1950s until 1980s, the state-orchestrated progress mission involved erasing local traces of the past. sKyo brag monastery along with its hermitages were destroyed, the *gnas* was deserted and neither pilgrimage nor meditation could take place there. Like many of fellow Tibetans, as a child and a young man, Tshul khrim mthar phyin was deprived of access to the local past and its ritual tradition; he received primary education in a state school and worked as a government official. In spite of his religious inclinations, he had to conceal his zeal for meditation practice.

In spite of this past, Tshul khrim mthar phyin was able to ignite the "blissful heat of *gtum mo*." In order to achieve this, he first clearly chose to remember the version of local history that underlines power and ritual. As he relied on the activities and wonders of the white-robed yogins and great non-sectarian masters, the 'Ba' rom school and the local tradition could add blessing to his maturation process. But essentially, since the yoga of *gtum mo* requires the fuel of emotions and energies provided by the body, Tshul khrim mthar phyin's personal transition from a Maoist uniform of a village cadre to the white robe of a *ras pa* involved the transformation of the collective past of all Tibetans. Rather than being a source of shame, pain or bewilderment, the history of Khams and all ethnic Tibetan regions became the source of power, translated into both ritual and social strata. Then, as the *ras pa* gained control over his

⁹³⁸ Qin 2000, also compare Powers 2007: 411.

body, mind, and fate, he chose to propagate this version of the local past in order to shape the future for his disciples.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's body, transformed through the mystic practice of *gtum mo* became capable of reconstructing a whole cosmos of traditional values and identities. As the people's saint, he became empowered to act on behalf of others to alleviate their reaction to what Wallace terms "stress" or, in other words, to reconcile their different, personal and collective dilemmas. He ensured that the legacy of Mi la ras pa, Karma nor bu and sKyo brag Chos rje is not only remembered, but also accomplished. He established the La phyi meditation school, a project whose neotraditionalist nature would be able to offer an answer to the ruptures in continuity, desacralization, colonization and secularization of society, history and landscape. Tshul khrims mthar phyin has been extremely successful in all of his endeavors and even managed to become a reformist, promoting female meditators and cooperating with masters from other schools.

X.3.1.3.1.1. The white robe as tool for Tshul khrims mthar phyin's "symbolic agency"

As explained above, Tshul khrims mthar phyin founded and administers a venue where people can find schooling and practice the local Tantric tradition today. However, the symbolic meaning of his *ras pa*'s white robe is so prominent and penetrating that it deserves analysis as an independent aspect of his influence that I term "symbolic agency."

There are quite a few modern saints (usually referred to as *grub thob*) active in Khams today, and I have seen several cases of a local community instigating a cult of a living or recently deceased hermit. Still, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's case is extraordinary. There may be many *grub thob*, but only one "wearer of white cotton" (*ras pa dkar po*) with this kind of a wide-reaching influence. It is because of his white robe that he enjoys a special position among the privileged ritual specialists: the conspicuously white, cotton garment, immortalized in photographs popular across northern Khams has lionized him as the Mi la ras pa of the post-Mao era, able to transform its collective traumas and quandaries into bliss and warmth.

The contemporary symbolism and "role-blockage" articulated by the red robes of the Tibetan monks and nuns has been discussed above. On top of this layer of meaning, the white robe is even more striking because it marks the virtuoso among the renunciates, all the more since it is worn the entire time, unlike other symbols of religious attainment and authority such as ceremonial hats that are only worn on special occasions.⁹³⁹

⁹³⁹ For whiteness which identifies a holy man in a similar context of another revival of Buddhist culture, also displaying millenarian traits, see Tambiah 1988: 296.

Charisma is often captured in the insignia of ritual power that stand for authority of office.⁹⁴⁰ As a *shamanic* master, Tshul khrims mthar phyin has no official position except for guiding his meditation school. The white robe, however, the sign for perfection of renunciation, radiates an aura of power and mysticism. I have mentioned how the single white robe of a *ras pa* is seen as a ritual emblem of yogic expertise, handed down to chosen masters since the time of Mi la ras pa. Tshul khrims mthar phyin himself explains that the symbolism of white goes back to the early bKa' brgyud (hence referred to as dKar brgyud) fathers, his own preceptor and also to the original Tibetan *sangha*, consisting of the red-robed monastics and the white-robed yogins.⁹⁴¹

Whiteness is also connected with the local 'Ba' rom pa lineages of Ti shri ras pa, sKyo brag chos rje or bKa' brgyud bkra shis; in the context of the bKa' brgyud schools, the simplicity of the undyed, cotton cloth could be associated with the pure, unadulterated state of mind as taught in the Mahāmudrā lineages.

Since ritual symbols and acts are often indefinite enough to leave room for engendering new implications, the co-existence of all these different traditional explanations is complemented by two additional layers of contemporary meaning. As the *ras pa* is believed to have transcended his personal and “worldly” local history, he becomes a mirror for collective processes, and his achromatic cotton robe becomes white canvas upon which group sentiments can be projected. This occurs in a manner that activates two different types or layers of symbolic agency: respectively “mediation by negotiation” and “mediation by transcendence.”

First of all, concealed in the symbolic of the white robe is a negotiation of a traditional “Tibetanness” against other identities. It is obviously connected with the subliminal aspect of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's activity as an instructor in one of the Tibetan ritual lineages. According to Mona Schrempf:

[...] public displays of tradition [...] constitute a indelible mark in contemporary negotiations of Tibetan identities.⁹⁴²

In its unambiguity, the white robe definitely plays the role of the public display of tradition, which is similar to the symbolic function of the red robe of any monk or nun. So what makes the white robe more unique?

⁹⁴⁰ Tambiah 1988: 326.

⁹⁴¹ The allusion to the rNying ma *sngags pa sangha* is extraordinary since Tshul khrims mthar phyin is a *dge longs* ordained in the bKa' brgyud school.

⁹⁴² Schrempf 2002: 147-171, 150.

Wearing the thin cotton cloth marks the victory of an ascetic over the basic physiological needs for food and warmth. Precisely this was what made the most lasting impression on the majority of my informants. I was astonished by the fact that Tshul khrims mthar phyin's physical ability to withstand cold and lack of food is more celebrated than his skill in meditation or moral achievements. In almost all interviews, my informants pronounced the aspect of control present in the attainment of these powers (*dnegos grub*) – the command over the instincts to still cold and hunger. In this respect, the reason for Tshul khrims mthar phyin's popularity resembles the case of Acharn Cuan, the Thai “forest-monk” and founder of a successful retreat center described by Tambiah. This author observes that Acharn Cuan was also valued mostly for the more folkloristic dimension of his attainment, which stresses superhuman powers.⁹⁴³

Extending ritual power to conquer the microcosmic reality of the body or the macrocosmic reality of the environment is a common theme in the traditional ritual discourse at Chab sti. However, along with the rise of Tshul khrims mthar phyin as a modern hero from the nearby Kha cham village, the process of empowering the body receives additional connotations. It becomes a manifestation of self-determination of an individual and his will to uphold the uniquely Tibetan Tantric tradition *vis-à-vis* the oppressive state policies that undermine the traditional identity and a longing for autonomy, especially afflictive in a region like sKyo brag with its rich past of ritual and political supremacy.

The theme of survival, introduced by the white robe, does not only represent Tshul khrims mthar phyin's endurance at Chab sti without food, clothes and shelter. The emergence of this powerful symbol after the decades of suppression also denotes the triumphant resurrection of Tibetan Tantrism in all of its previous glory. When Tshul khrims mthar phyin appeared at Chab sti in the 1990s, his white robe was not only an indication of his attainment of the Inner Heat, but also a sign of survival of the transmission he received from his guru, Karma nor bu bzang po, another white-robed saint who had endured the Cultural Revolution, then re-emerged and inspired a new generation of disciples. The narratives of Karma nor bu's life and his photographs in the white cotton apparel are very popular in hermitages all across Khams; seeing the modern cotton-clad yogin Tshul khrims mthar phyin, the continuity of power is difficult to overlook.

The white cotton robe makes it possible for Tshul khrims mthar phyin to directly channel the “mnemonic icon” of Mi la ras pa. Not only is the latter remembered as Tibet's greatest

⁹⁴³ Compare Tambiah 1988: 274-289.

yogin and poet, but the complexity of his legend evokes the time when Tibet was awakening to a revival of the indigenous Tantric initiative to prove that it can flourish even after a prolonged time of destruction and persecution.⁹⁴⁴ Both *Mi la ras pa* and *Tshul khrims mthar phyin* prove that the potential for the productivity of Tibetan ritual experts has not been lost and that it is still relevant in a time of change.

The endurance of “The Second *Mi la ras pa*” (*Kar nor*) and the subsequent emergence of “The Third *Mi la ras pa*” (*Tshul khrims mthar phyin*) within the PRC and beyond the Tibetan refugee community is all the more important in that it challenges the exiles’ view of their native ground as polluted, steered by a hostile, materialist doctrine and devoid of religious leadership.

Tibetan bodies became instrumentalized when they became the targets of CCP’s “civilizing projects.” The understatements woven into the fabric of the white robe antagonize the powerlessness of the Tibetan minority in the PRC with the figure of a religious leader, whose ritual power has set a prevailing standard for others to follow and thus to determine their own destiny. Moreover, *Tshul khrims mthar phyin* as a leader is willing to show the way to liberation “in this body and life” to anyone who expresses genuine interest in the path of renunciation. Even the omnipresent authority of the state cannot undermine the striving for this particular kind of individual independence, which occurs within the legal framework of the PRC’s constitution and its paragraphs on religious freedom.

All of these messages that the white cloth conveys are valuable offers for identity construction; this is why *Tshul khrims mthar phyin* inspires so many Tibetan disciples. As a persuasive ambassador of their religious tradition, he does not only inspire the ascetics who train under his guidance, but also many lay people across Kham and other Tibetan regions.

Alternatively, the cotton robe of the *ras pa* stands for another important level of symbolic agency previously coined as “mediation by transcendence.” According to the Tibetan tradition, the perfection of renunciation involves a re-connection with the world in order to perform an impartial activity for the collective good of all sentient beings; the white robe is one of the recognized signs of this perfection, paired with the complete transcendence of suffering and the accomplishment of or approximation to the ultimate goal of enlightenment. In the *bKa’ brgyud* schools, enlightenment is described by means of the *Mahāmudrā* terminology, which depicts the absolute state as non-composite (*’dus ma byas pa*), unlimited (*ma ’gags pa*), free from all extremes (*mtha’ thams cad dang bral ba*), free from clinging to

⁹⁴⁴ For the mythology see Powers 1992: 75.

characteristics (*mtshan 'dzin med pa*) and non-dual (*gnyis med pa*).⁹⁴⁵ This is how the white cloth can become a canvas for projecting universal soteriological hopes and as such, a promise of attaining the goals of liberation and enlightenment, which stand for the reconciliation of all quandaries.

As someone whose life, religious practice and later agency as a Tantric guru included the accommodation of many opposing realities, Tshul khrims mthar phyin is especially convincing in this reconciliatory role. He was able to prove that treading the Tantric path inevitably leads to a transcendence of all predicaments, as achieved by Mi la ras pa, whose mystic poems do not just depict the conflict of the mundane world and enlightenment, but also provide the recipient with patterns for their resolution.⁹⁴⁶

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's white robe, which characterizes the *gtum mo* body of experience is a hallmark of understanding the ultimate Tantric teaching: that *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*. As such, it provides a paradigm for effective mediation between worlds or concepts that seem incompatible for many: destruction and renewal, Khams pa Tibetans and Han Chinese, Tibetan religion and Marxist materialism, Tibetans within and without the PRC, family life and religious vocation, humiliation and triumph, solitude and collective life, detachment and activity, public and secret strata, tradition and modernity, high social standing and simplicity, asceticism and joy, androcentric convention and female disciples, the *shamanic* and the *clerical*, mysticism and organized religion, *dharma* for the laity and for the ordained, conservatism and reform, widespread and rare ritual transmissions.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's widest audience, his fellow Khams pa Tibetans from sKyo brag, Kha cham or Shar mda' empowered him to represent the beyond-personal Tantric objectives of liberation and enlightenment. The prospect of attaining these goals at La phyi *sgom grwa* can settle the dilemmas stemming from a collective "identity crisis," while offering a sense of purpose, belonging, security, and coherence to the practitioners and to all who are involved in their support. In a broader perspective, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's example is relevant to anyone who exhibits genuine interest in his teachings, and his fame is on the rise, since he embodies the universality that constitutes a promise of liberation from the burden of all individual or collective predicaments present in the lives of his Tibetan, Chinese and Western disciples.

⁹⁴⁵ For the specific teachings and the didactic methods used by Tshul khrims mthar phyin, see the next chapter.

⁹⁴⁶ Powers 1992: 76.

XI. La phyi *sgom grwa*: The Secret Life

The following sections depict the hidden and more sophisticated performance of renunciation. This protected stratum becomes accessible only after one has committed to the first aspect of renunciation – detachment. Furthermore, the “secret life” is the innermost sphere of the venue that is only available to those who are capable of fulfilling a number of uncompromising preconditions. They include the commitment to Tshul khriṃs mthar phyin as their guru, accepting monastic vows, adhering to the rules of this particular training facility and obtaining the necessary Tantric prerequisites of empowerment, permission and instruction (*dbang lung khrid*).⁹⁴⁷

The meditation techniques used at La phyi are the main means for the anticipated transformation into a Buddha “in this body and life”; this goal is directly embodied in the guru of the hermitage. In the next passages, by examining the content of the retreat, I will discuss the advantages of the training that arise for the individual meditator from different perspectives. Do they only benefit the individual on a purely spiritual level or does the path to liberation and enlightenment also yield other benefits?

The instructions on the practices (*nyams len*) describe the many boons, which will arise for the practitioner as an ordinary sentient being (*so so'i skye bo*) aspiring for buddhahood. Even if performed in secrecy, the training cannot be completely shielded from the outside world – it is still a performance of tradition carried out before the society. What are the benefits that the La phyi nun gains as a social being?

The Tantric schooling taking place at La phyi is completely invisible to the non-initiate visitor. When the meditators perform their practice, their bodies, the scriptures and techniques they use, as well as the guru's direct guidance (*man ngag/gdams ngag*) are all shielded from display. These elements of training are veiled with the help of the traditional pledges of secrecy accompanying Vajrayāna practices, as exemplified by Tshul khriṃs mthar phyin's root lama, Karma nor bu:

[...] The lama [Kar nor] and his [vajra-] siblings, the ones who recommended to act in secrecy, said: “what is secret should be kept secret.” In accordance with that, the things that should be sealed with the seal of Ten Secrets⁹⁴⁸ – because [secrecy]

⁹⁴⁷ Ordination vows are either given by Tshul khriṃs mthar phyin on the site or people arrive already as monastics. In the latter case they have mostly taken the *Vinaya*-vows from gSal byed at sKyo brag or from A khyug mkhan po in Ya chen. As for the necessary initiations (*dbang skur*), see below as follows.

⁹⁴⁸ “The ten secrets are an important point in *gsang sngags* secret mantra practice. They are comprised as follows: 1) sgrub pa'i dus gsang ba “the time of practice is secret”; 2) sgrub pa 'i gnas gsang ba “the place of practice...”; 3) sgrub pa'i rdzas gsang ba “the substances of practice...”; 4) sgrub pa'i yo byad gsang ba “the articles of practice...”; 5) dkyil 'khor gsang ba “the mandala...”; 6) cho ga gsang ba “the ritual...”; 7) phyag rgya

itself is something to be kept secret – the qualities of signs on the path should be hidden from *samaya*-violators, non-initiates and non-believers as if they were stolen goods [...].⁹⁴⁹

The Tantric methods applied at La phyi are safeguarded from the eyes of non-initiates and, as Tshul khrims mthar phyin explicitly stated, non-believers (*dad med pa*) especially because the proper understanding of the intricacies of Tantric practice calls for a certain degree of maturity (*smin pa*), which usually results from the completion of earlier stages of training. The degree of experience can be assessed by the guru only, and it is sometimes assumed that preparation could have also taken place in former lifetimes.

As much as the Vajrayāna is glossed as an “immediate path,” it does require a great deal of careful groundwork. The deeper a practitioner becomes immersed in the system of meditations taught at La phyi, the more privacy is required to shelter the practice itself, so that its blessing power (*byin rlabs*) will not dissipate. For this liminal period, the body and the speech of the retreatant, which likewise become the objects of transformation, require protection as well. As for the mental level, it is important for the trainee not to share their inner experiences (*nyams pa/tshor ba*) of the practice – not only with the non-initiates from outside of the hermitage’s *maṇḍala*, but also with their co-meditators, who might easily mistake the fleeting experiences on the path for the goal. Moreover, by revealing the subtle signs of successful transformation to others, a beginner-hermit becomes exposed to the risks of arrogance (*nga rgyal*) and attachment to experiences, which should be seen as delusions (*’khrul pa*) and mere wayposts to the grand objective of buddhahood.⁹⁵⁰

Neither will the accomplished yogin disclose his experiences (*tshor snang*) if the setting is inappropriate, just like Tshul khrims mthar phyin rejected the plea of the Western film team to reveal his state of mind in front of the camera.

Today, with the advent of modern technologies, easier mobility and the PRC’s free market economy, the Tantric requirement of confidentiality faces an increasing number of challenges. The fact that modernity is encroaching on secret practices is also visible at La phyi. For instance, manuals on one of the most concealed practices of Tantric Buddhism, the Six Yogas

gsang ba “the mudras...”; 8) sngags gsang ba “the mantra...”; 9) gsang bar ’os pa= dam rdzas (“sacred items or substances”); 10) gsang ba gnyer gtad pa (“secrecy is protected”). (Duff 2005, s.v. “*gsang ba bcu*,” text in parentheses mine).

⁹⁴⁹ [...] *bla ma dang mched lcam gyis gsang bar gyis zhes smras pa rnams gsang ba la gsang bar gnyer gtad pa zhes de ltar gsang ba bcu’i rgyas gdabs pa rnams dam nyams dang/ dbang ma thob pa dang dad med la gsang bar bya ba nyid yin pa’i phyir lam rtags kyi yon tan rnams rkun nor bzhin du sba* [...]. (Karma stobs rgyal 1999: 33).

⁹⁵⁰ Compare Crook & Low 1997: 333-341. Also see below in the section on the main practices of La phyi where I discuss the concealment of body, speech and mind, especially relevant in the case of the more advanced meditations.

of Nāro pa, are exhibited for sale for the general public at the state-owned bookshop at Shar mda' for as little as 14.50 RMB.⁹⁵¹ Tourism in Qinghai and the global reach of Tibetan Buddhism are growing factors that might encourage more visits by people “not genuinely interested in the teachings,” as Tshul khrim mthar phyin put it. Ultimately, the state extends its control to all expressions of religiosity to ensure that religious practices do not contain “separatist” or anti-government elements.

Ironically, until now, government influence has worked to the advantage of the meditation school. Tshul khrim mthar phyin's acknowledgement as a Tantric instructor by the official local religious leader gSal dga' rin po che, the *clerical* authority from sKyo brag, has helped the cotton-clad yogin to obtain permission for the establishment of his project at the Chab sti mountain. Moreover, a local government official is behind the initiative to build a road up to Level I.

For the sake of success of the “psychophysical processes” occurring in meditation, as well as for the efficacy of tradition, the master and his disciples at La phyi *sgom grwa* guard the secrecy of Tantric methodologies. The opportunity of undergoing Tantric training under the supervision of Tshul khrim mthar phyin, one of the most famous bKa' brgyud pa masters active in Khams today, has been the motivating factor in the choice of this facility for most of the retreatants. As such, the reputation of La phyi as an intact sphere of authentic transmission is also the reason behind the rapid growth of the *ri khrod*. The subsequent passages explain what traditional techniques are applied at La phyi under the guidance of Tshul khrim mthar phyin as a Tantric guru in order to develop the students' individual and social potential.

XI.1. The curriculum as a vehicle for liberation and transformation

The program at La phyi is constructed on the basis of the open-door policy, meaning the trainees can join in, start their education and leave for their home monastery or other institution whenever they wish. However, regardless of the duration of their stay, they will have to express a commitment to the curriculum designed by Tshul khrim mthar phyin, which follows traditional outlines. Since most nuns I interviewed were resolved to stay at La phyi for their whole life, they will benefit from the hermitage's offer of a structured, gradual continuity of training schemes, accompanied by supplementary and non-compulsory offers.

Any given practice hermits devote themselves to is expected to be carried out individually, during the four sessions (*thun*) of the day, whose exact timing has been described above.

⁹⁵¹ Mar pa Lo tsā ba 1995.

Meditation (*sgom pa*) forms but one of the three main pillars of successful Vajrayāna training; the remaining two pillars are the view (*lta ba*) and conduct (*spyod pa*). Although the life of a hermit is especially structured to accentuate the element of formal meditation practice divided into sessions, the correct understanding of Buddhist philosophy and corresponding behavior is necessary to complement successful Tantric practice.

Rules of conduct at La phyi *sgom grwa* are defined through the Vinaya and more specifically, through the set of principles described in the previous chapters. As for philosophy, it is taught mostly in connection with the specific instructions to be applied in meditation (*khrid* or *gdams ngag*). It is based on the precepts of the Mahāmudrā, and either integrated into the practice one is currently devoted to, or into the advanced complex of formless meditations of *zhi gnas-lhag mthong*.⁹⁵²

The following passages will present the La phyi curriculum as a means for liberation and transformation in both the religious and social sense. Obviously, processes of body-mind metamorphosis are connected with Tantric performance *per se*, and as such they would not necessarily have to be limited to this or other Khams pa hermitage. Nevertheless, the fact remains that especially when it comes to the most advanced practices (but also generally speaking, the structured meditation curriculum that precedes them), it is specifically the hermits that engage in meditation; for the inhabitants of this region, serious meditation training traditionally belongs in a hermitage.

XI.1.1. The basic methodology

Many newcomers, especially those who have recently given up their lay life, begin with the very fundamental skills – reading and writing in Tibetan. The youngest nuns attend the alphabet classes run by Yon tan chu mtsho, whereas women past their teenage years study by themselves in their cabins with occasional assistance from other nuns.

The next important point of the groundwork training at La phyi is learning to maintain the correct meditation posture, especially vital in this facility, where the nuns are expected to remain in the sitting position not only during the sessions but also during the night. The posture of the seven points of Vairocana (*rnam snang chos bdun*) is explained and presented by the alphabet teacher-nun; after that it is rehearsed in one or more group sessions.⁹⁵³

⁹⁵² The Mahāmudrā is also introduced in form of *gdams ngag*, which in fact resembles the *sems kyi ngo sprod* method. See below for the description of the core training.

⁹⁵³ For the “seven-points posture,” see the classical bKa’ brgyud pa text by the 9th Karma pa, the *Phyag chen ma rig mun sel*, translated in dBang phyug rdo rje, et al. 1978: 37-9.

When the novice has been prepared, she can begin with the proper training, devised after the established bKa' brgyud pa model. However, there is an atypical feature that defines the training at La phyi. For the fact that most nuns in the *sgom grwa* are complete beginners, and the project itself is not older than three years, an important, though possibly momentary shift in the curricular emphasis should be noted: both the general and the special preliminaries for the Mahāmudrā (*phyag chen sngon 'gro*), even if the name suggests an introductory position in the traditional program, form the core of the transformative exercises at La phyi. Since the more advanced meditations require practice experience, they need more time to dissipate among the practitioners.

In the Mahāmudrā lineages, progress on the path is described by means of the “four yogas” (*rnal 'byor bzhi*): “one-pointedness” (*rtse gcig*), “simplicity” (*spros bral*), “one taste” (*ro gcig*) and “non-meditation” (*sgom med*).⁹⁵⁴ Speaking in more practical terms, the tradition has developed an apparatus of mental and concurrently corporal training, which serve as introductory techniques for the Mahāmudrā. The Mahāmudrā Preliminaries (*phyag chen sngon 'gro*), a system of eight preparatory exercises, were devised by the 9th Karma pa on the basis of existing Sūtric and Tantric devices; at least since the time the guidelines were composed in the early 17th century, they have formed the foundation of the bKa' brgyud pa meditation retreat curriculum. As such, they are also used at La phyi.

The schooling at the *sgom grwa* commences with the *de facto* contemplative practices of the “four thoughts [that] turn [mind] away [from *samsāra* and toward *nirvāṇa*]” (*blo ldog rnams bzhi*): the freedoms and advantages of the human existence, death and impermanence, *karma*-cause and effect, the faults of *samsāra*.⁹⁵⁵ The “four thoughts” form the “general preliminaries” (*thun mong gi sngon 'gro*). Practically speaking, they are reflections upon the drawbacks and benefits of one's existential situation (i.e. *samsāra*), whose goal is to bring about a change in the mind of the practitioner in order to induce renunciation and dedication to the Tantric path:

Firstly, the object of meditation is this precious [human body endowed with] freedoms and advantages. It is hard to obtain and easy to destroy, [therefore, this rare opportunity] should be used at this very moment.

Death and impermanence: secondly, the world and all beings inhabiting it (*snod bcud*) are impermanent. Particularly, the lives of sentient beings resemble water bubbles. The moment of death is uncertain; when I die, I will become a corpse.

⁹⁵⁴ Rheingans 2008: 37-8; dBang phyug rdo rje, et al. 2008: 236-268.

⁹⁵⁵ 'dal 'byor/ 'chi ba mi rtag pa/ las rgyu 'bras/ 'khor ba'i nyes dmigs. Compare dBang phyug rdo rje, et al. 1978: 19-29.

Therefore, I should [now] practice vigorously to [accomplish] the benefits of the dharma teachings.

Karma, cause and effect: thirdly, at the moment of death, I do not have self-control. With regard to *karma*, in order to take control [of my mind], I have abandoned negativity and will always pass [my time with] meritorious actions. With this thought I should examine my mindstream everyday.

The disadvantages of *samsāra*: fourthly, *samsāric* places, friends, joys, possessions and the like resemble the executioner's banquet on the way to the execution ground, because [ultimately,] I will always be afflicted by three kinds of suffering.⁹⁵⁶ Therefore, I have severed desire and attachment and will vigorously [strive to] attain enlightenment.⁹⁵⁷

These instructions are first explained by Tshul khrims mthar phyin to what frequently is an entire group of beginner students and then contemplated by each person in their cabin in an individual manner. During a later interview with the instructor, when the practitioners show results of understanding the first point, they are permitted to proceed to the second, and so on. The process of assimilating each contemplative exercise can take days, weeks or months.⁹⁵⁸

Then, the “special preliminaries” (*thun mong ma yin pa'i sngon 'gro*) follow. Among the many types of introductory techniques that precede most advanced Tantric meditations, the particular set of methods applied at La phyi were devised especially to prepare the practitioner's body, speech and mind to the training in the Mahāmudrā tradition. Similarly to the “general preliminaries,” the four meditations are performed in a sequence: the first one must be concluded before the second one is started, etc. Still, there is an important difference, as the nuns' progress is not measured by the guru, rather a preconditioned obligatory amount of repetitions they have to complete (111,111).

Like all Vajrayāna practices, the four meditations involve the requirement of obtaining Tantric empowerment, permission and detailed oral instructions (*dbang lung khrid*). Since Tshul khrims mthar phyin bestows *dbang skur*-ceremonies only rarely, La phyi meditators rely on the support of gSal byed. In order to receive an empowerment from him, they go down

⁹⁵⁶ According to the BGT, the three sufferings are: the suffering of suffering (*sdug bsngal gi sdug bsngal*), the suffering of change (*'gyur ba'i sdug bsngal*), the all-pervading suffering of conditioning (*'du byed kyi sdug bsngal*). (Zhang Yisun 1985, 2: 2211, s.v. “*rtsa ba'i sdug bsngal gsum*”).

⁹⁵⁷ *dang po sgom bya dal 'byor rin chen 'di/ /thob dka' 'jig sla da res don yod bya/ /'chi ba mi rtag pa ni/ /gnyis pa snod bcud tham cad mi rtag cing/ sgos su 'gro ba'i tshe srog chu bur 'dra/ /nam 'chi cha med shi tshe ro ru 'gyur/ /de la chos kyi phan phyir brtson pas bsgrub/ las rgyu 'bras ni/ gsum pa shi tshe rang dbang mi 'du bar/ /las ni bdag gir bya phyir sdig pa spangs/ /dge ba'i bya bas rtag tu 'da' bar bya/ /zhes bsam nyin re rang rgyud nyid la brtag/ /'khor ba'i nyes dmigs ni/ bzhi pa 'khor ba'i gnas grogs bde 'byor sogs/ /sdug bsngal gsum gyis rtag tu mnar ba'i phyir/ /gsod sar khrid pa'i gshed ma'i dga' ston ltar/ /zhen 'khris bcad nas brtson pas byang chub sgrubs/ (dBang phyug rdo rje 2001: 67).*

⁹⁵⁸ The above fourfold contemplation has been used as a crux of preliminary training in the bKa' brgyud schools at least since the time of sGam po pa, who most probably adapted these Mahāyānā instructions known from the bKa' gdams pa school to the Mahāmudrā-oriented training. See Trungram Gyaltrul 2005: 169.

to the monastic village of sKyo brag; if the *lung* and *khrid* are not included, they are supplied by Tshul khrims mthar phyin at the hermitage.

The four special preliminaries are performed at La phyi according to the Karma bKa' brgyud school; there are only minor adjustments as to the visualization of the Refuge, which in this case encompasses the 'Ba' rom lineages.⁹⁵⁹ They entail the following: 1) going for Refuge and generation of *bodhicitta* (*skyabs 'gro/sems bskyed*) 2) meditation and recitation of Vajrasattva (*rdo rje sems pa'i bsgom bzlas*) 3) [the presentation of a] *maṇḍala* (*dkyil 'khor*) 4) *guruyoga* (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*).

The first and the third technique are rather corporal practices and in their course, the body of the practitioner is engaged in the transformation process to a further extent than in other meditations. Going for Refuge and generation of *bodhicitta* is the most physically demanding at this point, since the meditator prostrates (*phyag 'tshal*) to the envisioned cloud of representations of the sixfold Refuge of the Vajrayāna, the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud pa gurus, deities and *dharmapālās* in form of a "Tree for Preliminary Practices" (*sngon 'gro'i tshogs zhing*). Depictions of the 'Ba' rom Tree were printed at sKyo brag monastery and are sold in all of the shops at the village; many nuns own a poster.

In fact, the practice of taking Refuge has many levels. Firstly, it is a singular vow-taking procedure, signifying that an individual has entered the Buddhist path; this ceremony strongly binds them to the teacher bestowing Refuge. Secondly, it is a special point of emphasis in this particular preliminary practice. Thirdly, it constitutes an organic part of any Tantric meditation; therefore, at places like La phyi sgom sgrwa, it is renewed as many as four times a day.

The prostration involves stretching one's body on the floor to its full length, only to get up immediately afterwards and start the whole process all over again. Practitioners are instructed that the enlightened beings in front of them represent their own true nature, the state of awakening (*byang chub*). They should open up to them completely, "go for Refuge" (*skyabs 'gro*), and while doing so, they should include all sentient beings (*sems can/'gro ba*), who also wish for happiness. The generation phase (*bskyed rim*), like in the case of all Tantric practices, is followed by the completion phase (*rdzogs rim*), where the entire visualized entourage of lamas and deities is dissolved into light and absorbed into the practitioner, who

⁹⁵⁹ It is probable that the 'Ba' rom pa traditionally followed the Karma bKa' brgyud pa version of the preliminaries, designed by the 9th Karma pa dBang phyug rdo rje (1556-1603). For textual resources see the sections on the scriptures used below.

should develop trust that from that moment on, they have become inseparable from this entourage.⁹⁶⁰

Much in the manner of the first task of the preliminaries, the third meditation involves more physical actions as well as preparation of materials used. The presentation of the *maṇḍala* entails building up an imaginary perfect universe in the form of rice heaps (*tshom bu*) placed on an ornamental, offering disc (*mchod pa'i dkyil 'khor*) and offering it to the Refuge imagined as lineage masters and deities and projected into another disc (*sgrub pa'i dkyil 'khor*). Here, the aim is to perfect the “two accumulations” (*tshogs gnyis*) of merit (*bsod nams*) and wisdom (*ye shes*), which along with the purification of *karmic* defilements and mental habits form the necessary basis for the Mahāmudrā-practice.⁹⁶¹

The necessary equipment for this practice, beside the two circular discs and dry, uncooked rice, includes a large cloth used like an apron for holding the rice and preventing it from falling onto the ground, after which the rice should be discarded.

The presentation of the *maṇḍala* is concluded by the brief completion phase as well as the dedication of merit (*dge ba yongs su bsngo ba*), which ends each of the *sngon 'gro- sādhanās*.

The second and the fourth practices mostly occupy the practitioners' mental sphere and their voice. Thus, the practice of prostrations before the Refuge is followed by the meditation and recitation of Vajrasattva, intended to clear away transgressions (*sdig*) and obscurations (*sgrib*). In this ritual, the visualization involves imagining a clear form of Vajrasattva over one's head, projecting purifying nectar that enters the meditator's body and washes away mental veils and wrongdoings.

The fourth practice is essentially an elaborate form of *guruyoga*, whose gist is to fortify the connection to one's root guru and his lineage, extolled by many praises (*stod pa*) and wishing prayers (*smon lam*).⁹⁶² The central part of this practice involves the recitation of the following wishes 111,111 times. The formula is believed to have been spoken by the 1st Karma pa to his teacher, sGam po pa:

I supplicate [my] precious teacher:

Bestow your blessing that I cast ego-clinging away.

⁹⁶⁰ In the *Phyag chen sngon 'gro*, the completion phase does not include abiding in the state of emptiness (*stong pa nyid*). This is more advanced and will be described below.

⁹⁶¹ Kong sprul & Hanson 1977: 105.

⁹⁶² The scripture itself enumerates the Karma bKa' brgyud pa lineage holders; however, here it is obviously understood more broadly as the bKa' brgyud pa collective with their common stem of the three patriarchs Mar pa, Mi la and sGam po pa.

Bestow your blessing that non-attachment arises in my mind-stream.

Bestow your blessing that non-*dharmic*, discursive thoughts cease.

Bestow your blessing that I recognize my mind is unborn.

Bestow your blessing that delusion is pacified by itself.

Bestow your blessing that I recognize all appearances as *dharmakāya*.⁹⁶³

This final preliminary is all the more important because all bKa' brgyud pa disciples especially rely on the closeness to the guru, hence the importance of engendering devotion (*mos gus*) as a precondition for receiving the Mahāmudrā.⁹⁶⁴ This devotion can also become the vehicle for the highest accomplishment "in this body and life." The 9th Karma pa wrote in a Mahāmudrā-manual:

If worthy disciples sincerely and one-pointedly direct supplications at an authentic, qualified teacher, offering their irrevocable devotion, they will **in one life and in one body** manifest the primordial wisdom of Mahāmudrā; this is infallible.⁹⁶⁵

The manual used for the *sngon 'gro* practice at La phyi is Kong sprul's *Nges don sgron me*.⁹⁶⁶ The study course guided by Tshul khriims mthar phyin takes place at the hermitage in winter. Throughout the year, questions are dealt with individually, during the regular personal interviews with Tshul khriims mthar phyin or in groups, often guided by the visiting instructors from Ya chen. 'Jigs med grags pa admits it is difficult to organize the explanations for the growing group.

Unlike in the tight temporal conditioning of the three-year retreat, students are free to accomplish their *sngon 'gro* repetitions at their own pace. There is also no age limit, so as soon as novices feel ready, they can begin with the preliminaries.

The desired results of the *sngon 'gro* are: awakening the capacity for renunciation, purification of the afflictions and defilements that prevent the recognition of the practitioner's Buddha-nature within, establishing the guru as a personal role model and creating an individual connection with the Tantric tradition in general, and with the Karma pa and 'Ba'

⁹⁶³ *bla ma rin po che la gsol ba 'debs/ bdag 'dzin blo yis thong bar byin gyis rlobs// dgos med rgyud la skye bar byin gyis rlobs/ chos min rnam rtog 'gags par byin gyis rlobs/ rang sems skye med rtogs par byin gyis rlobs// 'khrul pa rang sar zhi bar byin gyis rlobs/ snang srid chos skur rtogs par byin gyis rlobs//*." dBang phyug rdo rje 2001: 81.

⁹⁶⁴ For the commentaries on the 9th Karma pa's *Phyag chen sngon 'gro*, see Kong sprul & Hanson 1977 and dBang phyug rdo rje, et al. 2009: 20-107. Also see Nydahl 1998.

⁹⁶⁵ [...] *snod ldan gyi slob ma zhig gis mtshan nyid dang ldan pa'i bla ma dam pa la rtseg cig tu kha zhe med par gsol ba btab cing bzlog med kyi mos gus phul na tshe gcig lus gcig la phyag rgya chen po'i ye shes mngon du byed pa bslu ba med pa yin/* (dBang phyug rdo rje 1997: fol.135).

⁹⁶⁶ Translated in Kong sprul & Hanson 1977.

rom pa lineages in particular. By means of the correct understanding, concentration and persistent repetition, meditators activate the transformative dynamics of the Preliminaries, which contribute to a thorough reconstruction of self-image. They receive a new identity that is much more promising than the one they had upon entering the retreat.

The conscious, recurrent confrontation with the “four thoughts” begins the transformation process. In contrast to her recent situation, the nun contemplates the dramatically new and constructive reality: she can rely on this very body as the basis for reaching enlightenment in one lifetime. She is shown the prospects she was not aware of and is encouraged to appreciate them. This constitutes the first step in building up her self-reliance, an opportunity she has been denied as a rural *minzu* woman in the far-off corner of the PRC. From this moment, she is the possessor of the precious human body, endowed with the latent perfection that can be accomplished here and now. She becomes a *dge ma* – woman of virtue – and disciple of “The Third Mi la ras pa”.

As much as she is taught to appreciate her own potential, good fortune and the value of training in an “unbroken” tradition that survived in spite of the decades of persecution, she should also contemplate the suffering of beings in *samsāra*. Yet in the case of a young La phyi nun, *samsāra* as she has known it is represented by the reality of her birthplace – the contemporary sKyo brag, Kham cham, Rab shis or Shar mda’, the impoverished, provincial villages and towns in Nang chen county that are deprived of political autonomy, are economically underprivileged and subject to scrutiny by foreign officials. The *dge ma* learns to understand the futility of the general *’khor ba* that encompasses all living beings by confronting her own situation as a disadvantaged citizen of communist China. For the La phyi nun, life in *samsāra* means living in an area still recovering from a collective post-traumatic disorder after the Cultural Revolution, desperately attempting to conceal the most humiliating moments from the lives of its leaders (Kar nor or gSal dga’) or their own powerlessness to determine their own lives (Tshul khrims mthar phyin). It is the world of people disillusioned at the calculated benevolence of the state, deprived by the local economy, which leaves few choices for decent livelihood, cut off from their own cultural roots, and disoriented by the shifting values of post-Dengist China.

The four contemplations, performed in the grand perspective of enlightenment, on one the hand support the meditator in her decision to take up renunciate life and on the other, direct her onto the path of liberation from both her general human afflictions and the collective suffering experienced by the Tibetan community of Yushu TAP. Having discarded all active social roles, the *dge ma* makes room for a new identity. As the meditation instructions point

out which identity should be cultivated instead, she receives a precious gift that many other young Khams pa men and women of her generation do not possess – a meaning to her life and an unambiguous course for its path.

The prostrations allow her to surrender to the power of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, so that this power can work through her body, speech and mind. She can also feel confident that the benevolent power of this tradition will include her family, who support her in retreat, and eventually, all living beings. She becomes empowered to act for the benefit of all.

The blessing of Vajrasattva is aimed at cleansing the mindstream, speech and body of all transgressions. When in the concluding part of the practice, the deity consecrates not only the meditator, but also the whole world around, the practitioner can have trust that anything harmful that occurred to her teachers Tshul khriims mthar phyin or gSal dga' or at the sacred spots of Chab sti and sKyo brag during the earlier, more violent days of the Chinese communist presence, has now been removed, repaired and healed.

The construction of the *maṇḍala* sanctions the meditator, a simple rural woman and an insignificant member of the PRC's many minorities, to promote her status significantly, and become the *cakravartin* – universal monarch, surrounded by inconceivable riches of the ancient Indian imagination.⁹⁶⁷ In thankfulness for the promise of a new direction for her life, the practitioner offers this entire splendor to the gurus and the deities of the lineage.

By means of the *guruyoga*, the La phyi nun receives the precious prospect of life-long guidance. Furthermore, she can now identify with her guru and lineage adopted in the role of her personal roots and accessible source of power, in contrast to the official, degraded version of Tibetan past preached by the state, and in spite of the powerlessness of the *minzu*. The example of Tshul khriims mthar phyin as someone who traversed the path before shows that such reorientation and transformation is possible not only in hagiographies, but also also in Nang chen *rdzong* today. Like Mi la ras pa himself, Tshul khriims mthar phyin rose from an average layperson and village cadre to a renowned saint, a “source of Refuge” for others and a hallmark of Tibetan tradition “in this body and life.”⁹⁶⁸

⁹⁶⁷ Although the transformation during the *maṇḍala* practice is also a gendered one, as the *cakravartin* is necessarily male and possesses the respective attributes of masculine power, analyzing this aspect of identity change would not be relevant in the context of this study and would additionally exceed the scope of this thesis. For notes on the gender question in the present thesis, see Chapter Nine in the current work.

⁹⁶⁸ Compare the spiritual and social transformation of nuns in the current study with the study contained in Qin (2000).

XI.1.2. The advanced practices

When the preliminary *sadhānās* are completed, the practitioner should, at least theoretically, be prepared to proceed to the more sophisticated methodology. At this point, it is assumed that the meditator is mature enough to decide what she would like to learn next and, if the duration of performance is not prescribed in the definition of the practice, how long she would like to stay with it.

As I have mentioned, most people at La phyi are absolute beginners and the *sgom sgrwa* has not existed for long. Due to this, as well as for the popularity of the different addenda and the lack of strict time frames for the completion of the preliminaries, not many nuns have had the chance to undergo the actual core training. For the majority, the contact with the most advanced methods, which in fact constitute the central part of the curriculum, is limited to the information on what is to come: the beginners exchange with other nuns as much as the intensifying secrecy vows permit.

The program for the *sngon 'gro* graduates is in fact an adapted version of the Karma bKa' brgyud pa three-year curriculum. It encompasses *guruyoga*, *yi dam* practice, Mahāmudrā instructions and/or the Six Yogas. All of these are in fact entry ways into the pinnacle of the bKa' brgyud pa doctrines, the Mahāmudrā, and all require relying on the direction of a qualified guru.

According to Kong sprul, the approaches toward the Mahāmudrā, as popularized by sGam po pa, can be systematized into the Mahāmudrā of the Mantra (*sngags kyi phyag chen*), Mahāmudrā of the Sūtra (*mdo'i phyag chen*) and the Mahāmudrā of the Essence (*snying po'i phyag chen*).⁹⁶⁹ What connects them is the shared context of the same view (*lta ba*) that mind's true nature is the naturally existent (*lhan skyed*) union of bliss and emptiness (*bde stong dbyer med*).⁹⁷⁰ All of these approaches are recognizable in Tshul khrims mthar phyin's teaching style, which is described below.

XI.1.2.1. Identification with Mi la ras pa as the guru

The importance of the teacher is vital for the attainment of Mahāmudrā. Since at least the 8th century, the devotional path of the *guruyoga* (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*), which contains a formalized *sādhana* on the form of one's guru, as well as the "post-meditation" (*rjes thob*)

⁹⁶⁹ See Rheingans 2008: 34-7.

⁹⁷⁰ In the context of the 'Ba' rom school it should be noted that 'Ba' rom Dar ma dbang phyug developed his own special lineage of the Mahāmudrā. In time however, the different bKa' brgyud schools cooperated in the transmission, so that very often the succession lines intertwined. As a result, there was little or no difference in teaching styles.

view of complete identification with his enlightened body, speech and mind (*sku gsung thugs*), has been defined by the proto-bKa' brgyud pa Indian masters as the practice that unites all paths.⁹⁷¹

If a La phyi practitioner opts for a *guruyoga*, she can theoretically choose the different types of transmissions available.⁹⁷² Practically though, the most popular one is the *Mi la bla sgrub*, an extensive *sādhana* centered around Mi la ras pa. It involves ritual offerings (*tshogs mchod*) and staying in a sealed retreat, during which the meditator's body, speech and mind must be hidden from the world. As already mentioned, the text of the *Mi la bla sgrub* was brought to sKyo brag in the 19th century by none other than Kong sprul himself, who composed the practice at his main hermitage of Tsā 'dra rin chen brag.⁹⁷³

The practice cycle takes up to three months to complete and is either carried out in the Phag mo cave, a venue dedicated to an important bKa' brgyud pa *yi dam*, or at a vacant hut/booth on Level I. The performance of this type of retreat requires that one of the other nuns provide practical help (cooking, supplying food and fuel, etc.).

The goal of this meditation is the total transformation of one's body, speech and mind (*lus ngag yid*) into the awakened body, speech and mind (*sku gsung thugs*) of Mi la ras pa, who is inseparable from one's root lama. The path of the *guruyoga* is said to unite all other Tantric methods in one, just as the figure of the guru combines all enlightened qualities. This is why devotion (*mos gus*) becomes the practitioner's way to tap this resource. In a classical bKa' brgyud pa manner, Tshul khrim mthar phyin explains:

You should open up to the lama with such fervent devotion and one-pointed concentration that you will start crying and trembling and will not be distracted by thoughts or sounds.

You can repeat "Lama think of me!" (*bla ma mkhyen no*) with great longing and then let mind rest (*ngal gso*) [in its essence].

XI.1.2.2. Becoming the deity

Also the Mantra Mahāmudrā entails devotional elements since its accomplishment relies on receiving *Anuttarayoga*-empowerment (Skt. *abhiṣeka*; Tib. *dbang skur*) from the guru. In this ritual-based transmission, Mahāmudrā corresponds to the fourth initiation, termed the "word

⁹⁷¹ Seegers 2000: 165-166. Also see Nydahl 2004.

⁹⁷² For instance: the *guru-sādhana* of 'Ba' rom Dar ma dbang phyug or *Thun bzhi bla ma'i rnal 'byor*, a *guruyoga* on the 8th Karma pa. However, the former is rather practiced in connection to the 'Ba' rom *smon lam* and the latter is mostly used as a daily chant supporting one's main practice. For the text of the *Thun bzhi bla ma'i rnal 'byor* see Mi bskyod rdor rje 2001.

⁹⁷³ See Chapter Three.

empowerment” (*tshig dbang*).⁹⁷⁴ Having obtained the fourth initiation by the blessing-power of the guru (*byin rlabs*), one should perform meditation in two stages: the generation phase (*skyed rim*) and completion phase (*rdzogs rim*).⁹⁷⁵ This practically leads the meditator to deity practices (Skt. *īṣṭadevatayoga*; Tib. *lha’i rnal ’byor*). At La phyi, they are standard Mother Tantra (*ma rgyud*) – contextualized meditation deity (*yi dam*) forms used by all bKa’ brgyud schools – the female form rDor je Phag mo (Vajrayoginī) or the male ’Khor lo bDe mchog/’Khor lo sdom pa (Cakrasaṃvara).

Kalu Rinpoche, a modern master of the Karma bKa’ brgyud school, explains that in *yi dam* practice, the generation phase deals with the understanding that all mental phenomena like thoughts or feelings are the union of wisdom and emptiness, equal to the mind of the *yi dam*.⁹⁷⁶ The 3rd Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339) maintained that performing Mahāmudrā in the generation phase involves the cultivation of the state of unity of the generation and completion stages, free from clinging (*’dzin pa*) to the inherent existence of appearances.⁹⁷⁷ This is why the first stage should necessarily be concluded with the completion phase.⁹⁷⁸ Here, the Mahāmudrā can be practiced in two ways: formless (*mtshan med*) and “endowed with characteristics” (*mtshan bcas*).⁹⁷⁹ As an expression of the formless path, the visualized figure of the *yi dam* dissolves into light and is absorbed (*thim*) into the body of the practitioner. All phenomena disappear and the meditator rests in the open, luminous and unhindered (*stong pa gsal ba ma ’gags pa*) essence of mind, source of all appearances.⁹⁸⁰

The performance of *yi dam* meditation requires strict solitary retreat. The La phyi nuns undertake the short, sealed seclusions of this type at the Phag mo cave or in the tiny, ascetic *ras pa*-booths at Level I. The deity retreat takes six months to complete and the more advanced practitioner can combine *yi dam* meditation with *rtsa rlung* exercises.

The application of this training requires a strong reliance on the guru and his oral transmission, since both practice texts and instruction manuals for the deity yoga are

⁹⁷⁴ The preceding empowerments are the vase empowerment (*bum pa’i dbang*), secret empowerment (*gsang dbang*) and wisdom-awareness empowerment (*shes rab ye shes dbang*). See Rheingans 2008: 35.

⁹⁷⁵ Rheingans 2008: 35.

⁹⁷⁶ Karma Rang byung kun khyab, et al. 1997: 211.

⁹⁷⁷ dBang phyug rdo rje 1978: 99.

⁹⁷⁸ Rangdröl, et al. 2004: 78-79.

⁹⁷⁹ Which basically means Six Yogas of Nāro pa (*Nāro chos drug*), the advanced system of applying subtle energies, encompassing the *gtum mo*.

⁹⁸⁰ Compare: Karma Rang byung kun khyab, et al. 1997: 211. Also see dBang phyug rdo rje 1978: 99-100.

intentionally obscure or even misleading.⁹⁸¹ The gist of the *yi dam* practice, according to Tshul khrim mthar phyin is:

You meditate that you are not your usual self; you are the *yi dam*. In other words, you and the *yi dam* are inseparable, like milk that has been mixed with water. However, this enlightened form is not substantial; it is like rainbow light or a reflection of the moon in a pool of water – form and emptiness are inseparable (*snang stong dbyer med*). You should never stop this practice and maintain it at all times – using the deity form and mantra this way is the best protection against mental poisons (*dug*).⁹⁸²

The practitioner applies the imagined reconstruction of her body into the form of the *yi dam*, her speech into the deity's mantra, her mind into wisdom (*ye shes*) and emptiness (*stong pa nyid*) inseparable, and her environment as their *maṇḍala* to the effect of eliminating the habitual clinging to phenomena as intrinsically existent.⁹⁸³ As Tshul khrim mthar phyin remarked, it is vital to continue the process in the “post-meditation” period (*rjes thob*); i.e. also between the sessions, all the time.

In this way, the whole experiential reality of the meditating nun – the time, place, her body and mind – undergo further transformation. Her identity continues its passage from an underprivileged member of a minority group, through a fortunate and autonomous *dharma* practitioner to eventually turn into a metaphysical being dwelling in a consecrated sphere of boundless freedom and bliss. The cultivation of this view-experience at La phyi has profound consequences not just for its community, but also for its supporters, and is discussed in Chapter Twelve in the section on the millenarian tendencies in the functioning of the *sgom grwa*.

XI.1.2.3. Mahāmudrā didactics

The esoteric instructions on the Mahāmudrā (*phyag chen gdams ngag*) are imparted individually and under the condition of utmost confidentiality, also in order to protect the subjectivity of spiritual development, which is susceptible to unwanted influences. The *gdams ngag* technique used at La phyi seems identical to the instruction style known as “pointing out the nature of mind” (*sems kyi ngo sprod*) of the Essence Mahāmudrā-approach.⁹⁸⁴

⁹⁸¹ Compare Crook & Low 1997: 336.

⁹⁸² The five poisons are: 1. desire and attachment (*'dod chags*) 2. anger (*zhe sdang*) 3. ignorance (*gti mug*) 4. arrogance (*nga rgyal*) 5. jealousy (*phrag dog*). (Zhang Yisun 1985, 2: 1258, s.v. “*dug lnga*”).

⁹⁸³ Compare dBang phyug rdo rje 1978: 99, Karma Rang byung kun khyab, et al. 1997: 210-211.

⁹⁸⁴ It seems like Tshul khrim mthar phyin and his disciples use the terms *gdams ngag* and *man ngag* synonymously, but this inconsistency is found both in bKa' brgyud pa historical meditation literature and contemporary practice. See Kapstein 1996: 275-289. In an interview from 04.04.2010 in Malaga, Spain, mKhan po Nges don informed me that *man ngag* and *gdams ngag* are synonymous, only at times *man ngag* denotes

The Mahāmudrā of Essence emphasizes the immediacy of access to enlightenment. It deals with the immediate recognition of “ordinary mind” (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), which stands for the perception of the perfection co-emergent (Skt. *sahajā*, Tib. *lhan cig skye pa*) with all phenomena and experiences so that the practitioner is able to directly perceive the nature of mind (*sems kyi ngo bo*). This recognition, however, cannot be achieved without the assistance of a competent master, who stimulates its arising by means of a “pointing-out instruction” mentioned above. Since realization depends on the guru, it is said that in order to obtain it, the meditator must develop devotion.

At La phyi, the *gdams ngag* in the style of “pointing-out instruction” is transmitted in a series of personal interviews between Tshul khrims mthar phyin and a single disciple.⁹⁸⁵ After each teaching session, the student should include the guru’s advice into their meditation practice and upon the next consultation, recount their insights and experiences. Throughout such interviews, the disciple’s performance is facilitated by means of questions posed by the guru; for instance:

Where is your mind? What is it?

Where do thoughts come from? Where do they go?

Who is the knower of thoughts? Is he different from thoughts?⁹⁸⁶

As expected from Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s non-scholastic and pragmatic approach, typical for a yogin, the purpose of the queries is not to induce a philosophical discussion, but to determine the disciple’s individual predicaments in meditation practice. When the guru ascertains the main obstacle, he applies an antidote: the actual “pointing-out instruction” in the form of expert counsel given to the individual disciple in order to improve the meditation practice of that specific recipient. The instruction should be analyzed, contemplated, included into meditation sessions in a non-conceptual manner and assimilated into everyday experience. In short, it should result in total immersion into the meaning of the instruction.

more secret instructions, which are given orally. However, the highly secretive, individual formula of the Mahāmudrā instructions imparted by Tshul khrims mthar phyin and termed “*gdams ngag*” very much resemble the *sems kyi ngo sprod* model, so it is possible that this terminology has undergone further adaptation.

⁹⁸⁵ Tulku Urgyen claims that this is the local tradition: “The word ‘meditator’ in my homeland of Nangchen is closely connected with the pointing-out instruction of Mahamudra, the most profound teaching in the Barom lineage. Almost everyone living in Nangchen received this instruction, which directly introduces the state of realization, and so they all became meditators.” (Tulku Urgyen, et al. 2005: 13).

⁹⁸⁶ Karma Rang byung kun khyab, et al. 1997: 229.

When applied with the right amount of energy and devotion, it can lead to the discovery of mind's nature (*sems kyi ngo bo*), which is synonymous with enlightenment.⁹⁸⁷

Tshul khrims mthar phyin grants these instructions exclusively on Level I, sitting in his favorite tiny cave-booth, while the disciple sits in front of its entrance. Under no circumstances is the meditator to reveal the content of these interviews, let alone the “pointing-out instruction,” to anyone. This is because the transformative dynamics of these dialogues lies between the guru and the disciple alone. They are highly individualized, spontaneous and intimate; sharing them with someone else would cause their power of influence (*byin rlabs*) over the individual to dissipate.

Technically speaking, Tshul khrims mthar phyin holds the Mahāmudrā transmission from the Karma bKa' brgyud school, passed on to him by his root lama, Grub chen Karma Norbu.⁹⁸⁸ Tshul khrims mthar phyin enhances his own teaching scheme of awarding Mahāmudrā precepts with other traditional methods, which do not require such a level of confidentiality.

In contrast to the immediate (*cig car*) approach of the Essence and Mantra paths, a system later called Sūtra Mahāmudrā was introduced by sGam po pa as a “gradualist” (*rim gyis*) path to enlightenment.⁹⁸⁹ This “gradualist” approach involves a set of mental exercises of quiescence (Skt. *śamatha*, Tib. *zhi gnas*) and insight (Skt. *vipaśyanā*, Tib. *lhag mthong*).⁹⁹⁰ sGam po pa's innovation was based on the *Samādhirāja-sūtra* teachings, and it was precisely that which incited the later critique by Sa skya Paṇḍita, who claimed that Mahāmudrā is neither expressed in the *pāramitā*-teachings nor is it accessible without prior initiation.⁹⁹¹

At La phyi, the explanations for the *zhi gnas* and *lhag mthong* methodology are granted in smaller groups. Firstly, these formless techniques help settle the mind beyond the extremes of tension and laxity, leading to bliss (*bde ba*), clear light (*'od gsal ba*) and non-conceptuality (*rnam par mi rtog pa*). The next step is understanding the nature of the subtle processes of mind at rest (*gnas pa*), mind stirring [with thoughts] (*'gyur pa*) and the non-dual recognition (*rigs pa*) that all appearances (*snang ba*) are mind.⁹⁹²

⁹⁸⁷ Karma Rang byung kun khyab, et al. 1997: 229.

⁹⁸⁸ Most probably he also holds the 'Ba' rom Mahāmudrā from gSal byed rin po che, though I was not able to confirm this.

⁹⁸⁹ D.P. Jackson 1994: 24-5.

⁹⁹⁰ For a thorough description see dBang phyug rdo rje, et al. 1978: 35-93.

⁹⁹¹ Mathes 2007: 545.

⁹⁹² Tshul khrims mthar phyin bases his Sūtra Mahāmudrā instructions on the classical manual by 9th Karma pa, the *Phyag chen ma rig mun sel*. For the *zhi gnas*/ *lhag mthong* techniques according to the 9th Karma pa see: dBang phyug rdo rje, et al. 1978.

What concerns the Tantric approach to Mahāmudrā, if practitioners are interested in directly following the *ras pa*'s footsteps and want to learn the Six Yogas from him, they usually commit to the three-year meditation in sealed retreat, which is the topic of the following section.⁹⁹³

Already during the Preliminaries, the La phyi practitioners enter the path of transformation and receive a new identity. Once they are ready to begin with the advanced training, this new, better self is not only reaffirmed, but also develops in the social and religious spheres. Obviously, on the social level, by becoming an expert in the Tantric arts, one's status is promoted from a rural person to a member of a highly trained and revered elite, positioned at the uppermost echelons of traditional society. However, there are even more benefits to this conversion. As the training proceeds, the entirety of an ordinary being, comprised of ordinary body, speech and mind (*lus ngag yid*) is turned into the enlightened body, speech and mind (*sku gsung thugs*) of the lama or *yi dam*. In this way, liberation (*thar pa*), understood as both deliverance from the suffering inherent in the *samsāric* condition and the collective dilemmas of the Tibetan minority in the PRC, becomes a real prospect.

Regardless of how clandestine the transformation process is, Tantric practices are cultural performances, and these are endowed with the power to negotiate the identity of the performers and their audience. When performances are also articulated in the folklore arena – like in the case of Tshul khriims mthar phyin, eulogized for superhuman abilities such as melting snow or leaving a handprint in stone – the private and individual spiritual experiences of the hermit develop into statements of cultural allegiance and ethnic pride. As such, the expected results of these practices concern all contributors to the revival of the traditional culture, not just the meditator elite.

Although the qualities that the guru and deity express are considered universal potential attributed to all living beings, the tradition behind these methodologies is uniquely (Indo-) Tibetan and was perpetrated in the sKyo brag and Chab sti areas by the great yogins of the past. Again history becomes an argument for promoting the value of indigenous culture and connection to local landscape.

⁹⁹³ The *ras pa* will also occasionally offer a crash-course in the *gtum mo* to a chosen disciple. The disciple then starts practicing in the summer, so that it is easier for him/her not to freeze in the single robe before being able to experience the effects of the Inner Heat. Compare a similar bKa' brgyud pa-contextualized schedule as described in Crook and Low (1997: 95-100) in a meditation school in Bla ma g.yung drung.

XI.1.2.4. The three-year retreat

It can be intriguing for an outsider to find out that the open *sgom grwa* at the foot of the Chab sti mountain encompasses or exists parallel to other types of meditation training facilities. The *sgrub khang* is a sealed enclosure for the purpose of the three-year schooling program, developed by Kong sprul at his retreat site of Tsā 'dra and described in Chapter Three.⁹⁹⁴ The question is: why would practitioners need another, special form of meditation training if they are already living in a hermitage with a structured curriculum? The *gnyer pa* 'Jigs med grags pa explains:

The *sgrub khang* is not compulsory, but it is a help for lazy people, who can rely on the discipline and follow the pace of others. On the other hand, if you are good, it does not matter where you practice.

Although Tshul khriims mthar phyin opened the possibility to learn the Six Yogas outside the *sgrub khang*, I do not know of anyone who really took the opportunity, so momentarily, the three-year retreat is the only model of structured meditation training present at La phyi, where people receive the *gtum mo* transmission from the master-*ras pa*.

There are three *sgrub khangs* at La phyi, one of which, situated on Level I, is currently in use by eight monks, who began their retreat in 2007. The two lower *sgrub khangs*, situated on Level 0 were being finished in October 2008. The same year, a month after my departure from La phyi, the first group of nuns were about to be ritually sealed within the enclosure, including one of Tshul khriims mthar phyin's daughters and several nuns from Ya chen. A bstan phun tshogs will provide 60-70 RMB monthly per individual and the rest will be supplied by the relatives.

Since the time of Kong sprul, who constructed his first model at Tsā 'dra, until the 1950s when they were closed by the government, all *sgrub khang* enclosures had a similar, characteristic form. This model is now being reinstalled at La phyi. In 2008, the newly constructed *sgrub khangs* were not in use yet, which is why I was able to visit them.

The characteristic, U-shaped *sgrub khang* structure is composed of a walled courtyard, with four individual practice cells on each side; opposite the entrance stands a building encompassing the kitchen and a room for yoga exercises. On the upper floor there is *lha khang*/*'du khang* for group rituals and the *sgrub dpon*'s room. The cells' windows face the protected courtyard; the rooms/cells are only big enough to fit a personal shrine and a meditation box. For the period of three years and three fortnights, this entrance is sealed; the

⁹⁹⁴ For some historical notes on the three-year retreat see Chapter Two.

retreatants pledge not to come out, even in a case of a life-threatening situation. Besides the meditators, only three people are allowed to enter and leave freely; the main director (*rdo rje slob dpon*), an assigned cook/helper (*sgrub g.yog*) and the meditation instructor (*sgrub dpon*).

The *sgrub khang* on Level I has a changed architecture due to the irregular and steep terrain: on each side, two cells are stacked on top of each other to accommodate a total of eight monks. The entry into their enclosure is marked by an inscription on a wooden board, which ends with a pointed triangle and is painted with a flaming jewel, a *rdo rje*, a scorpion and a *kīla*. Apparently, it is dedicated to Chab sti as a Padmasambhava *gnas* and expresses the reinforcement of the *sgrub khang*'s protective outer circle:

Om – *vidyādhara* rDo rje drag po rtsal!

Āḥ – summoned from the sphere of compassion and emptiness [inseparable];

Hung – these [beings] have become ones that should be protected.

Phat – do not [allow] that they come to harm by any phenomena, gods or demons.

Om badzra raksha raksha % ⁹⁹⁵

The three-year retreatants' day is divided into four individual sessions plus one additional group session. Similar to other sKyo brag *sgrub khangs*, the program at La phyi follows the style of 'Jam mgon Kong sprul, but it is enhanced with the traditional practical details specific to the 'Ba' rom school as they were restored by 'Bar ba'i rdo rje; they start with the abovementioned Mahāmudrā preliminaries, which are expected to be concluded within the first year. They are followed by a *guruyoga*, *yi dam* practices, Mahāmudrā and finally, the Six Yogas.

At least from the time of Kong sprul, the basic schooling in the Six Yogas is included in the three-year retreat curriculum in bKa' brgyud pa *sgrub khangs*. Customarily, a trainee will spend several months with all six exercises. As it has been accounted for in Tibetologist literature and in travelers' writings, many of the *sgrub khangs* conclude the three-year meditation training with a demonstration of the *gtum mo* competency of the graduates, and on the New Year's day (*lo gsar*), the graduates leave the enclosure in a ceremonial procession wearing special hats and nothing much but a white, wet cotton cloth (*chu ras*) wrapped

⁹⁹⁵ *om rig 'dzin rdo rje drag po stsal (sic!) // āḥ stong nyid snying rje'i klong nas sbreng// hung srungs byar gyur pa 'di dag la// phat snang srid lha 'dre'i gnod ma byed// om badzra raksha raksha %*. Both the paintings and the inscription clearly refer to a wrathful form of Padmasambhava, rDo rje drag po, who is said to have appeared at Chab sti.

around their shoulders.⁹⁹⁶ They are then lead into the winter cold and before the public of local villagers, they are expected to dry the clothes with their body heat.⁹⁹⁷ This practice has been revived in the recent years in several *sgrub khangs* of Khams.

The 'Ba' rom performance of that latter practice along with the related '*phrul 'khor*' exercises transmitted in La phyi differs slightly from the Karma pa style.⁹⁹⁸ I was informed that three-year retreatants in all sKyo brag *sgrub khang* facilities practice the Six Yogas of Nāro pa, brought by the first 'Bar ba'i rDo rje. The transmission, besides the distinct physical exercises and the yogas themselves, also includes the scripture.⁹⁹⁹

Since the three-year training includes a great number of chanting rituals, it calls for a prior knowledge of reading and writing, a great deal of general Buddhist education and careful preparation. Moreover, one must be at least 16 years old to enroll. The required groundwork entails meritorious actions like producing *tsha tsha*, a course in crafting ritual offerings (*gtor ma*) and in playing instruments, as well as the study of the various Sūtric and Tantric scriptures.

Since I was unable to conduct research inside the functioning *sgrub khang*, I cannot examine the metamorphoses that occur inside the enclosure walls. However, for the same methodology used within the more open framework of the *sgom grwa*, I expect that the mind-body processes develop in similar ways. Instead, I would like to emphasize the broader social impact of this type of training.

After the period of liminality, the monks will have several career paths to choose from: they can return to their home monastery to take responsibility for the schooling of others, they can continue their hermitic career or become meditation instructors at other *sgrub khangs*. All of these life choices have one thing in common: from ordinary monks or nuns, the graduates become religious leaders and traditional social authorities. This is because the *sgrub khang* has one unique feature. Graduation from three-year retreat does not rely on the elusive results of the Tantric path; the outcomes are more official and tangible as each alumnus receives a *bla ma* title,¹⁰⁰⁰ as well as an additional symbol of ritual expertise special to these areas, i.e.

⁹⁹⁶ Samuel 1993: 240, David-Neel 1971: 228-229, Tshe ring, et al. 1988: 171.

⁹⁹⁷ Also see Samuel 1993: 240-241. For recent studies on changes in body temperature, see Benson 1991 and 1982.

⁹⁹⁸ Although Tshul khri mthar phyin's root guru Karma nor bu taught them according to the Zur mang bKa' brgyud school, the founder of La phyi first learned the Six Yogas in the 'Ba' rom pa *sgrub khang* at Dwa lha sgam po.

⁹⁹⁹ Bardor Tulku, written communication from 17.01.2010. For the specialties of the 'Ba' rom Six Yogas, see above in Chapter Six in the section on the 'Ba'rom pa doctrines.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Although in the Nang chen dialect, all monks are referred to as "*bla ma*," their status significantly changes with the official *bla ma* –title received after the completion of the three-year training.

the right to wear a replica of the famous five-peaked hat of Ti shri ras pa.¹⁰⁰¹ The high ritual and social standing of the graduates as disciples of an important local master will enable them to become new, active leaders of the revival, convincing in their representation of an authentic *ras pa* native to this area. In this way, they will contribute to the fulfillment of the collective wish for direction, education and revival of local institutions of authority, present throughout many areas of Khams.

XI.1.3. The addenda

XI.1.3.1. Daily protector chant

The daily chanting ritual to the guardians of the teachings (*gsol ka*) invoke the 'Ba' rom pa protectors. The sessions take place at 6 p.m. in the 'du khang, and they are accessible to all members of the *sgom grwa* community, including children, who sometimes outnumber the adult nuns. The lay inhabitants do not usually take part. Although Tshul khriims mthar phyin as the guru prefers to expose his disciples to the more demanding *sādhana*-methodology, which is executed individually, as opposed to the collective ceremonies performed in the monasteries; the *gsol ka* was composed by sKyo brag gSal dga' on Tshul khriims mthar phyin's request.¹⁰⁰²

The *gsol ka* is the only group ritual in the *sgom grwa*. The ceremony involves chanting, mudras, playing instruments and presenting *gtor ma* as well as mental offerings. The musical component is supervised by the experienced nun called *dbu mdzad* Zla ba sgrol ma. The instrumentalists' task is facilitated: the text contains many specific directives for operating instruments; for instance, the syllables which should be emphasized by music are marked red.

While the composition of the *gsol ka* text is discussed below in the section on the scriptures used in the hermitage, in the next few lines I would like to briefly mention its performative and ritual aspects. The text is the product of the modern local revival, since it was compiled and edited by the contemporary sKyo brag masters. To celebrate this, the colophones are included into the chanting ceremony and the names of gSal byed, Ye shes rab rgyas and A bstan phun tshogs are emphasized by the sound of horns (*rgya gling*) and cymbals (*rol mo*); even Tshul khriims mthar phyin's name is mentioned as one of the two most important supplicants for the actual compilation of the scripture.

¹⁰⁰¹ The hats are worn on special occasions only. Written communication with Bardor Tulku 09.03.2011.

¹⁰⁰² For the text, called *dPal 'ba' rom bka' brgyud kyi gsol ka bsdus pa* (gSal byed & dPa' brtan, n.d.), as well as the conditions of its emergence, see the section below on the scriptures used at La phyi.

The composition begins with the invocation of the 'Ba' rom root lineage and its specific, local sKyo brag branch. Reflecting the importance of the Vajrayāna trinity of the guru-yi *dam*-protector, it proceeds with a chant of a *sāadhanā* of the primary meditation deity of the 'Ba' rom school, Cakrasaṃvara (in union with partner).

In a series of invocations, the main part of the *gsol ka* addresses various dharmapālas (*chos skyong*), *samaya*-bound guardians (*dam can*), protectors historically connected to the bKa' brgyud schools, the 'Ba'rom in particular (*srung ma*), the sKyo brag gTer ma protectors (*gter bdag*), and mountain sentinel deities (*ri bdag*) of Khams and the broader Tibetan world.

The primal dharmapāla invoked is the Four-Armed Mahākāla (Phyag bzhi pa) along with his entourage – throughout the ceremony, several versions of summons of this protector in differing form appear; these editions were penned by different masters. Other important *dharmapālas* include (in the order of frequency of appearance in the text): Dud sol ma (Śrīdevī Dhūmāvātī) with retinue, the two-armed Ber nag chen Mahākāla (guardian of the Karma pa line), another two-armed form of Sa skya origin, rDo rje gur gyi mgon po (Pañjaraṇātha Mahākāla). The major protectors of the wordly *dam can*-class petitioned by means of the *gsol ka* incorporate mGar ba'i nag po and Zhing skyong. The Treasure guardians, linked with the revelations at Seng ge rdzong, are dGe bsnyen dkar po and rBa ba nag po. Other guardian deities echo the traditional mythologies rooted across Khams and other Tibetan areas. They are Gling Ge sar along with the array of the diverse mountain spirits headed by bKra shis Tshe ring ma, the deity of bSam gtan gangs bzang and gNyan chen thang lha.¹⁰⁰³

The scripture was printed in the classical *dpe cha* form; this is both easier to use during the chanting and makes a more “traditional” impression. To facilitate visualization, the practice text is illustrated with miniatures of major deities and lineage patriarchs. The protectors are propitiated with physical and imagined offerings and then approached with requests. The participants especially express the wish that the practice of Mahāmudrā and the Six Yogas be protected, but they also plead for support so that they themselves can accomplish enlightened activity (*'phrin las*), and that their life be long and free of obstacles, also described in terms of the different classes of malevolent spirits.

The sources and doctrinal background of many of those invocations re-appeal to the corporate bKa' brgyud pa identity known from Nang chen history, especially emphasizing the

¹⁰⁰³ Note that the order of appearance of the guardian deities in the ritual is different from my systematization within this description. I categorized them according to the emic typology of protector deities and spirits, whereas in the scripture of the *gsol ka*, the protectors appear in a mixed fashion.

traditional connection between the Karma pa and 'Ba' rom pa schools. By recalling scriptures authored or translated by Mar pa, the consecutive Karma pa and Zhwa dmar pa hierarchs, old alliances are summoned to reinvigorate the 'Ba' rom transmission. Furthermore, the rhetoric of the *gsol ka* transcends sectarian boundaries, as the text recollects the eclectic past of sKyo brag as a ritual territory. Treasure Revealers bDud 'joms rdo rje and gNam chos Mi 'gyur rdo rje are mentioned as authors, so is the latter's guru Karma Chags med, 'Ju Mi pham and dPal chen rGa lo, the 13th-century scholar-yogin, who laid foundations for several locally important transmissions, some of which were revived at sKyo brag in the Ris med era by 'Bar ba'i rdo rje.

Even if not all members of the hermitage turn up for the chanting session, it is the only group ritual at La phyi *sgom grwa*, repeated daily. Therefore, the ceremony has great impact on the community and on the construction of the hermitage as ritual territory. Firstly, the protective deities daily invoked and propitiated by the community extend their powers over the whole place and community, forming a protective circle around the hermitage and its members. This way, the ritual becomes important for delineating borders which define both this venue and the identity of its inhabitants. The interior of the *maṇḍala* provides a safe ground where identities can be formed against the “de-cosmologized” landscape around it, and regardless of the collective disorientation of the Tibetan minority.

During the *gsol ka*, as the entire cosmology of old sKyo brag is called in, the scenery of Chab sti becomes transformed before the practitioner's mental eye. The past, as it is buried in the local history, ritual traditions and landscape, and in which humans co-exist with powerful, superhuman creatures, is once again excavated to aid the practitioners in their quest for a lost identity. The ordinary La phyi panorama of an alpine pasture speckled with the crude cabins is powerfully transported into the glorious era of old sKyo brag, the semi-autonomous monastic dominion under the authority of local reincarnates and the religious Nang chen king. Especially the complete beginners who attend the ceremony will be stunned by this abrupt transposition from their rural world, where they are subject to the power of the modern Chinese state and victims to poverty.

XI.1.3.2. Other group rituals

As for other group ceremonies performed at La phyi, Tshul khriims mthar phyin guides a course of a ritual called the Transference of Consciousness (*'pho ba*). Its performance is irregular and it also open to lay people, who receive a chance to build a ritual link between the

venue and its master. The connection is additionally emphasized by the secrecy vows which bind all attendants of the *'pho ba* ritual.¹⁰⁰⁴

Further auxiliary practices are optional and vary from the special fasting service to the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara (*smyung gnas*)¹⁰⁰⁵ to additional daily chants. These can be transmitted from other practice centers like Ya chen or, as in the case of the bDe mchog *sādhana*, constitute complex yogic body-speech-mind liturgies reduced to a simple daily recitation, which will summon the blessings of a guru or a *yi dam*.¹⁰⁰⁶

As the trainees receive the “unbroken” transmission of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school, the quality of the instruction received at La phyi is combined with the variety of different methods as means for liberation and transformation on the spiritual and social plane.

XI.2. Scriptures used

La phyi is a facility dedicated to meditation and not intellectual study; on these grounds it is also open to illiterate rural women. Moreover, yogic lineages have always relied on oral transmission and the more advanced practices do not always require practitioners to use texts. For these reasons, only two scriptures are used throughout the *sgom grwa*: they are the abovementioned *dPal 'ba' rom bka' brgyud kyi gsol ka bsdu pa*¹⁰⁰⁷ and the book universally applied for the daily practice of the Preliminaries and the supplementary chanting, the *bKa' brgyud zhal 'don phyogs bsgrigs*.¹⁰⁰⁸

The performative aspect of the *gsol ka* has been presented above, however, I would still like to comment on the origin and contextualization of the scripture itself. This contemporary local composition, carried out on Tshul khriims mthar phyin's request, requires special attention. According to one of the colophons, the main body of the text was created by gSal byed rin po che in his hermitage above the sKyo brag monastery, reminiscent of the literary production occurring in the hermitages of the past, not only during the Ris med era, but also in

¹⁰⁰⁴ Compare Brauen-Dolma 1985.

¹⁰⁰⁵ I suppose that the popularity of *smyung gnas* practice that I observed not only at La phyi, but among other hermitages in Yushu TAP may also reflect ways in which many practitioners deal with the problem of shortage of resources for their retreat.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Another example is the *Thun bzhi bla ma'i rnal 'byor*, the *guruyoga* of the 8th Karma pa, which encompasses elements of deity yoga, elaborate supplications, complex visualizations, breathing techniques and body postures, and can even accommodate elements of the *gtum mo*. In spite of these sophistications, at La phyi, this practice is carried out in form of a simple chant. For the scripture, see Mi bskyod rdo rje 2001: 86-98.

¹⁰⁰⁷ gSal byed & dPa' brtan, n.d.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Karma gu ru 2001.

the 15th century at the original La phyi, where the narrative tradition of Mi la ras pa according to gTsang smyon was born.¹⁰⁰⁹

gSal dga' explains the circumstances of the composition of the *gsol ka* in this way:

The venerable, learned incarnate A bstan phun tshogs rin po che along with the renunciate yogin Tshul khrims mthar phyin, leaders among meditation masters and renowned protectors [of beings], together with many disciples, endowed with the faith of finding gold in a lump of dirt, [all] joined in [the expression of] their purpose [to have a daily protector ritual composed].

[Therefore,] after a long time, in response to their earnest requests, I complied with [their wishes] and at an appropriate moment, [I composed] an appeasement-petition ritual to the unified [dharma protectors] of the northern 'Ba' rom seat and the religious center of sKyo brag in Khams. The detailed or concise form [can be used] respectively according to the circumstances, and [it is meant as] a daily ritual practice to [be used to their] satisfaction.¹⁰¹⁰

This statement is significant not only because it is virtually the only textual source that mentions Tshul khrims mthar phyin and his activity.¹⁰¹¹ It should also be noted that the very same *gsol ka* scripture is used at the sKyo brag monastery and, since A bstan phun tshogs was its second petitioner, almost certainly also at Khang ne *dgon*.

The content also channels the initiative of another sKyo brag saint, Ye shes rab rgyas, as well as that of the major scholastic director, mKhan po dPa' brtan. This is why the *gsol ka* can be read as a modern manifesto of cooperation of local religious leaders dedicated to the revival of the 'Ba' rom lineages.

The second text used at La phyi is the collection of chants and *sādhana*s, entitled *bKa' brgyud zhal 'don*. It is little more than a pocket-sized book, printed in Western style on inexpensive paper and sold across Khams in monastery discount shops. It is used for the Special Mahāmudrā Preliminaries, which are the most widespread practice at La phyi. Therefore, owning it is matter of necessity.¹⁰¹²

The book also contains the basic monastic chants, long-life wishing prayers for Karma bKa' brgyud pa lineage holders, *pūjās* to honor the deities traditionally associated with this school, verses of aspiration and dedication, etc. As the name of the collection suggests (*zhal 'don*=

¹⁰⁰⁹ See Huber 1997 a: 243-244 where the author brings up the example of further texts revolving around Mi la ras pa and other hermits.

¹⁰¹⁰ 7 mkhan sprul a bstan phun tshogs rin po che dang/ bya btang rnal 'byor pa tshul khrims mthar phyin/ sgrub dpon mgon po grags pa rnam kyi gtsos/ bong ba la gser du mthong ba'i dad ldan slob bu du mas dgos dbang dang 'brel/ ring nas nan bskul ngor/ byang 'ba' rom pa'i gdan sa dang/ mdo stod skyo brag gi chos sde sogs kyi bskang gsol gcig gyur dus babs dang bstun nas rgyas bsdus 'tshams shing rgyun khyer nyams bzhes bde ba'i ched/ (gSal byed & dPa' brtan, n.d.: fol. 137).

¹⁰¹¹ The inscription under the "photographic *thang ka*" and Internet sources excluded.

¹⁰¹² For the discussion of the Preliminaries, see above.

honorific for “recitation”), the liturgies are not just performed in the practitioners’ mind and articulated by means of their bodies, but are also always recited out loud.

Many of my interlocutors refused to talk about the content of the text, let alone show it to me, as they declared that it was secret.¹⁰¹³ Be that as it may, Gavin Flood argues that regardless of a scripture’s concealment, its performance by an ascetic is always a public act:

The intentionality of the text and the intentionality of the ritual structure elicit a response in subjectivity, a response which itself is not ‘private’ but an index of the wider community. [...] In participating in the liturgy, a person is subsuming the referential or indexical-I to the ‘I’ of text and performance, and in doing so creates a tradition-specific subjectivity. This subjectivity is not individualistic but is itself a sign of the community and an expression of tradition. So while there is undoubtedly the development of interiority through text and ritual performance, this is not the development of a private self in contrast to a public self. Interiority is not private but developed in a tradition-specific way [...].¹⁰¹⁴

For all the precautions taken to conceal the Tantric scriptures and their content, the La phyi nuns are still presenting the text in a public arena, in that they conform their lifestyle to the narratives of enlightenment that the *bKa’ brgyud zhal ’don* invokes; they are also literally performing its content by means of their body, voice and mental visualizations during the four practice sessions. This is the Tantric Buddhist path of liberation from suffering, which involves the eradication of the illusion of an independently existing “I” (Skt. *ātman*, Tib. *bdag*), or as Flood expressed it, the paradoxical wish for the complete annihilation of the self so that it solely articulates the goal of the tradition.¹⁰¹⁵ In his/her employment of the text (be it written or oral), the identity of the La phyi practitioner becomes approximated to the “I” (*bdag*) or “we” (*bdag cag*) mentioned throughout the *Phyag chen sngon ’gro*, *’Ba’ rom gsol ka* or in the scriptures accompanying other methods for liberation and transformation in use at the meditation school.

By equating the purpose of human life with the objective of the tradition and its texts, the practitioner accomplishes a paradigm for the construction of the self, relevant in contemporary sKyo brag, where this tradition has been suppressed, ridiculed as inferior and obsolete, and instrumentalized. From 1980, since it was allowed to flourish again, it has faced numerous challenges. The fractured continuity of lineages, the desacralized landscape and the humiliated religious leaders – all of this has added to an image of tradition struggling to

¹⁰¹³ Still, I acquired a copy of the scripture at the monastic shop down at sKyo brag village and was later able to make certain that the text and the edition I obtained are identical with the book used at La phyi. Besides that, I had been well acquainted with the content of the Preliminaries, since I had myself completed the required number of the Karma pa *Phyag chen sngon ’gro* repetitions several years before.

¹⁰¹⁴ Flood 2004: 221-222.

¹⁰¹⁵ Flood 2004: 222.

redefine itself in a new, demanding environment. The hermits of La phyi, much like at other similar venues in Khams, are not just dedicated to the task of employing the ancient Tantric strategies of personal enhancement, but also to constantly proving them effective.

At La phyi, through the application of scriptures, the traditional identity of the Tibetan Tantric hermit is formed everyday and with every repetition, it creates a remedy against the predicaments of the Tibetan minority permeating the boundaries of the *sgom grwa*. In this way, the practitioner is armed to handle quandaries like the encroaching consumerism on the outskirts of the fastest growing market in the world, the frustration of the Tibetan minority at the lack of equality to participate in these opportunities, instrumentalization of the religious tradition, the lack of political autonomy for the Tibetan minority – and the resulting collective “identity crisis.”

Eventually, the effectivity of the transformation as well as the ideal of tradition embodied by the La phyi guru lies in the promise of transcendence of dilemmas. Therefore, they ultimately become resolved not just for the practitioners, but also their supporters. In the subsequent chapter, I analyze the construction of the image of La phyi *sgom grwa* as an isle of healing and emancipation from the suffering of *saṃsāra* and at the same time, from the dissatisfaction with the life in Nangqian Xian, Yushu TAP, People’s Republic of China.

XII. Summary and conclusions for the case study

XII.1. The principal agents

La phyi *sgom grwa* is a new project that became successful thanks to a few principal agents, both individual and collective. The most important one is obviously Tshul khrims mthar phyin as its founder and guru, followed by his teacher, colleague and main source for authorization, all united in one figure – sKyo brag gSal byed rin po che. I have grouped other agents according to the degree and type of contribution into the life of the meditation school. All of these agents form a tightly knit network, driven by the local legacy of power and renunciation, and creating a specifically Tibetan blend that has the ability to restore their ethnic pride and alleviate the collective “identity crisis.”

XII.1.1. Tshul khrims mthar phyin – local saint and people’s hero

In this section I would like to summarize Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s central role in the La phyi project. As the initiator and principal guru of this meditation venue, he is “the radial meeting point”¹⁰¹⁶ for all other agencies, and the whole hermitage revolves around him.

From the beginning, Tshul khrims mthar phyin was very skillful in building up his authority. From the beginning of his hermitic career, he combined the most powerful and expressive elements of the traditional Tibetan culture at sKyo brag and Chab sti – the yogic lineages, practices and role models, sacred geography, and the support of the local monastic authorities and reincarnates. With their assistance, Tshul khrims mthar phyin in many ways came to embody survival, transformation and continuation of a human being, Tantric practitioner and a participant of a culture negotiating its place in modern China. As such, he turned into a living icon of the Tibetan ethno-religious revival, and his training venue, named after the emblematic site where Mi la ras pa perfected renunciation and miracles, became a model example of traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture.

Ordained at an advanced age, Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s conversion could be perceived against the backdrop of many other stories of vocation, describing an older person turning to religion.¹⁰¹⁷ However, not all elderly monks achieve such high ritual and social status. This again recalls the topos of Mi la ras pa who set off on the religious path as late as at the age of forty-five and was nevertheless able to accomplish the goal “in that very body and life.”

¹⁰¹⁶ This way, he resembles the Thai saint Acharn, described by Tambiah (1988: 145).

¹⁰¹⁷ Compare Huber (2002 b: 143) and the forest-monk Luang phau described by Tambiah (1988: 286).

Again in parallel to *Mi la ras pa*, observing Tshul khrims mthar phyin's renunciate career as a "self-made man," striking is his social and religious empowerment.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's perfection of renunciation endowed him with the power to recreate the traditional cosmology, complete with its spatial and temporal axes, its values and identities. As the old cosmos of sacred sites, lineages of flying lamas, solitary hermits and their lay benefactors is restored in modern-day sKyo brag, it becomes a compelling offer to rebuild the traditional society, in which religion forms the foundation for social ties. Though radical in its emphasis on complete renunciation, the La phyi project effectively counteracts the discourse promoted by the Chinese state, which compromises the autonomy and self-confidence of local and all ethnic Tibetans, treated as a minority in their own land, and promotes a rapid modernization process that only emphasizes the urgency for resolving the collective "identity crisis." Together with other, similar venues that also cooperate with La phyi on many levels, hermitages and practice centers form a network of influence, stretching throughout entire Eastern Tibet. Hence, parallel to the developments in 19th-century Khams, they become a counter-power structure that emphasize Khams pa pride and autonomy in the face of foreign domination and degradation of the indigenous heritage.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's agency fulfills the wish for indigenous, local role models, as his disciples receive a direction in which to lead their lives. He is the living example which proves that even a village cadre can transform into a saint, equalled with *Mi la ras pa*. Since the personal history of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's career as meditation master runs parallel lines with the dramatic shifts in the politics, economy, society and culture of today's Khams, his accomplishment of the yoga of *gtum mo* does not just involve an individual mystic experience of controlling and reshaping one's own reality. It also marks the rebirth of a unique Tibetan body of survival and transformation.

The symbol of accomplishment of renunciation in the bKa' brgyud lineages and an indication of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's distinctiveness and charisma, the white robe of the *ras pa* becomes white canvas, used to project collective sentiments of the Tibetan minority in Yushu TAP and elsewhere in China, but also to mirror the attitudes shared by a global Buddhist audience.

As such, the white cotton robe becomes a tool for two types of symbolic mediation. The first one deals with the negotiation of traditional Tibetan identities *vis-à-vis* the roles predefined for the citizens of the People's Republic of China by the Communist Party and the state. As a symbol of the human triumph over the forces of nature, the simple white cotton

robe is a proclamation of endurance of the Tibetan Tantric tradition in the face of alien suppression and humiliation.

Customarily, the *gtum mo* body of experience, marked with the white robe, is an unmistakable sign of liberation “in this body and life.” When Tshul khrims mthar phyin internalized tradition and was able to resolve the diametrically opposed pairs of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, his cotton garb further became a dialectic tool for mediation between parallel realities and dilemmas present in lives of the Tibetan minority, such as the tension between the imperatives of the Chinese state and the uniquely Tibetan ethnic identity and religious legacy, or the antithesis of modernity and tradition. Embedded in the symbolism of the white robe of the *ras pa* Tshul khrims mthar phyin is the authority of the Tantric tradition which empowers him to reconcile these contradictions not only for himself, but also for others, who follow or venerate him.

Just as the achromic appearance of the cotton cloth reflects the state beyond all duality, the second type of mediation deals with ultimate transcendence. The ever-expanding charisma of ascetics like Tshul khrims mthar phyin proves that today, Tibetan Tantrism is reinvigorated not only to suit the needs of ethnic Tibetans, but that it has gained a new audience, magnetized by the universalist perspective of enlightenment, which addresses the ontological dilemmas of all humankind with the promise of their resolution. This is why its appeal to the international audience is constantly on the rise.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin is also a skillful reformer. His life and agency are evidence for his conviction that women can practice the most advanced Tantric teachings. Moreover, his own lifestory demonstrates that people who are hindered to set off on the path of religious vocation, can still accomplish high realization “in this body and life” along with a high position in the religious hierarchy. In his meditation school, Tshul khrims mthar phyin adopted the open-door policy in order to accommodate the needs of the education-deprived Tibetan minority of Yushu TAP. He offers them schooling in the traditional practices of the Tantric Buddhist hermits, which he firmly believes is the most significant knowledge a Tibetan or in fact, any sentient being can possess.

Both Tshul khrims mthar phyin and gSal byed rin po che are instrumental for the revival of the 'Ba' rom school in the region.¹⁰¹⁸ Still, their agencies are a good example of the complexity inherent in the Samuelian dichotomy of the *clerical* and the *shamanic*. Tshul khrims mthar phyin is the local *shaman*, but in order to act with complete authority, he did not

¹⁰¹⁸ Compare Germano 1998: 80 and Tambiah 1988: 306.

only rely on the established narratives and doctrines, but needed official recognition by the local monastic authorities.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin's agency demonstrates his skill to re-claim the continuity with the past as a "self-made man" and as such, a local people's hero. As opposed to reincarnates like gSal dga', who embody the unbroken connection with the past, Tshul khrims mthar phyin stands for the effectivity of new initiatives on the arena of the ethno-religious revival.

XII.1.2. gSal byed rin po che

Even if gSal byed rin po che is one of the few selected "heart disciples" of Grub chen Kar nor, as well as an accomplished yogin and dedicated hermit himself, he wears an ordinary red robe of a monk, lives in a spacious, comfortable residence and exercises the highest monastic function in the region. For this reason, he can be seen as Tshul khrims mthar phyin's more *clerical* counterpart. The fact that he bears the authority of a reincarnate and an abbot also explains why most of the revivalist activity in the written sources on the 'Ba' rom school and sKyo brag is attributed to him.

In spite of the official responsibilities, gSal dga' leads the *shamanic* life of a *tshe mtshams pa*. Also through his teaching style, he emphasizes the importance of meditation and retreat. Still, for Tshul khrims mthar phyin's charismatic white robe and folk appeal, it is the latter's pictures that are more widely on display throughout northern Khams in devotional context.

gSal dga's role for the development of La phyi is vital on many levels. Firstly, he was the one who inspired Tshul khrims mthar phyin to practice meditation in solitude at the local power place of Chab sti. Since the hermitage was established, he has regularly supported it with donations and with ritual input in form of monastic vows, instructions and Tantric empowerments. gSal byed also keeps sending many of his students, both male and female, to receive instructions from Tshul khrims mthar phyin or to settle at La phyi.

Yet, his key contribution to the growth of the *sgom grwa* lies elsewhere. Both mentioned lamas attract many disciples, but it is precisely Tshul khrims mthar phyin's *shamanic* image that has earned him the fame of "The Third Mi la ras pa," able to survive in the mountains with utter disregard for basic human needs like food or warm clothes. Regardless of the fact that it is this yogic appearance that coined and still maintains La phyi's reputation as an outstanding training ground for young renunciates, it is still gSal dga' to whom Tshul khrims mthar phyin owes his making as grand instructor of meditation and master of miracles.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin began his religious career as an elderly layman and then a simple monk, who, like many others, became involved in the revival of the Khams pa religious

tradition. For the shortage of qualified lamas in Khams today, Tshul khrims mthar phyin's solitary mountain period combined with the fame of his guru would have certainly gained him a certain amount of acclaim and disciples, but the direct and persistent patronage of the local monastic authority and simultaneously, the highest 'Ba' rom pa lineage holder has definitely helped him develop into a living embodiment of Mi la ras pa and director of a thriving facility for religious training.

The responsibility for the transmission of precepts is vital to any religion, let alone Tantric Buddhism; in most cases a guru will require to empower ascendants. When Tshul khrims mthar phyin's principal teacher Grub chen Karma nor bu died, it was necessary that another authority legitimizes both the accomplishment (*grub pa*) and the activity (*'phrin las*) of Tshul khrims mthar phyin as Tantric instructor. By virtue of their positive connection, gSal byed rin po che carried out this task willingly.

As an emanation of Glang ras pa, as well as the supreme abbot and a reincarnate of the long-established institution of sKyo brag, gSal byed embodies the continuity, purity and intactness of local tradition. This image is cautiously guarded by his disciples, who are resolved to keep the facts concerning his fate during the worst years of persecution quiet. By virtue of this "unbroken" connection with the past and with the locality, gSal dga' has the complete authorization to carry out his revivalist activities, similarly to his predecessor at sKyo brag, gTer chen 'Bar ba'i rdo rje.

This is why gSal byed rin po che was able to contextualize the charisma of Tshul khrims mthar phyin, an initially anonymous hermit, within the narratives of the sacred ground of Chab sti, as well as within the local tradition of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud. Thus, through the connection to the past, he legitimized Tshul khrims mthar phyin and positioned him in a hallowed landscape. Without this contextualization, the cotton-clad yogin could still be "adrift on the sea of [...] ritual uncertainty,"¹⁰¹⁹ unable to penetrate the circles of religious authority, his ritual ancestry vague.¹⁰²⁰

¹⁰¹⁹ Davidson 2005: 211.

¹⁰²⁰ On my first journey to Khams in 2007 I met a fascinating figure of another local saint (also referred to by lay people as a *grub thob*), and would like to briefly recount his story to compare Tshul khrims mthar phyin's activity with that of another "self-made yogin," but one who received no authorization to instruct others: Lama rDo rgyal (b.ca.1945) was an excentric who lived alone in a retreat hut above the plains and marshes surrounding the holy lake of Yid lhung lha mtsho (Chin. Xinluhai) outside the town of Mani gang ko, sDe dge county in the dKar mdzes prefecture of Sichuan. The retreat site was a *gnas* of bDe mchog and I was told that lama rDo rgyal's hut had been erected for none other than the great mKhyen brtse himself during the second half of the 19th century. Lama rDo rgyal was something of a crazy *siddha* (*smyon pa*) with some ties to the Sa skya school. Some twenty years before, he had stopped wearing either shoes or socks; he was also known to have miraculously survived falling into the icy lake. Often surrounded by local villagers and small groups of Chinese tourists, he liked to climb trees to affix prayer flags himself, talked incessantly, related his countless visions and

Only by means of his firm embedding in ritual place and time, could his hermitage of La phyi *sgom grwa* open the field for writing further successful narratives of ritual significance.

XII.1.3. Collective agents

There are two types of collective agencies active at La phyi. The first group consists of the renunciates who inhabit the *sgom grwa* and the *sgrub khang*; the second are the lay and the ordained who support the center from the outside. Both groups are intertwined through family ties and common interests.

All individuals, whose agencies directly contribute to developing La phyi center around the figure of Tshul khrims mthar phyin and less directly around, gSal dga' rin po che. For this reason, I consider them secondary to the primary activities of the leaders. Tshul khrims mThar-phyin as guru forms the axis for all interests: he focuses and co-determines the nature and extent of supportive agencies – whether people wish to donate money, offer provisions or work force, harness Tshul khrims mthar phyin's *shamanic* skills, whether they come to La phyi for religious instructions or join the hermitage to learn meditation. However, these interests are not always mutually exclusive and often one action will stem from more than one type of motivation.

All of my informants insist that the venue, its master and his methods express an unbroken continuity of with the local past. Just as the recently published sKyo brag or Nang chen chronicles relate the lifestories of the consecutive local reincarnates without interruption, leaving out problematic fragments that would otherwise reveal that they had gone into exile, were persecuted or even killed by the Chinese, the figures of the La phyi luminaries are constructed with the help of omissions (gSal byed, Karma nor bu) or contain straightforward distortions of truth (Tshul khrims mthar phyin, Karma nor bu). By manipulating with the past, the agents behind La phyi's growth are emphasizing their concern with the purity, authenticity, connectedness and efficacy of their religion today.

The monks and nuns inhabiting the hermitage form a closely-knit community. They are bound by the outlook on the meaning of life, the same teachers, knowledge of the same secret doctrines, dedication to discipline, the *samaya* of shared Tantric initiations, and as gSal byed

exhibited unexpected and expressive emotional reactions. On my short visit to his *ri khrod*, Lama rDo rgyal frankly admitted that he did not have sufficient religious training, just as openly as he communicated his rationale for not wearing shoes – he wanted to become remembered in the local history. I observed two teenage monks who stayed with him as disciples and must confess that lama rDo rgyal's didactic approach and methods seemed rather unconventional. Although an authority for villagers and attention-magnet for Han visitors, two of whom I had the opportunity to observe, and even if his *ri khrod* stood on tradition-hollowed ground, I had the distinct impression that for his lack of association with a specific living ritual ascendant, lama rDo rgyal's role was more prominent in the folk imagination than among religious professionals.

poetically expressed it, the “trust of finding gold in a lump of dirt.”¹⁰²¹ The manager, 'Jigs med grags pa receives a special role, since he is the one who reaches out to the monastic and lay world outside.

The principal contribution of the monastic community lies in renouncing lay life and everything that it entails, in order to pursue liberation “in this body and life,” as taught by Tshul khrims mthar phyin. Renunciation activates the traditional resource networks, which activate the social and religious empowerment of those who perform it. In return, the *sgom grwa* supplies the entire community around it with access to paradigms for identity construction, indispensable for the disoriented Tibetan minority in the PRC.

The significance of local religious teachers active outside the hermitage should again be accentuated. I have already brought up the agency of gSal byed, but in addition to him, the young reincarnate A bstan phun tshogs has also shown himself as promoter of Tshul khrims mthar phyin's expertise in meditation instruction; he also became one of the donors for the three-year retreat at La phyi. A further local saint, Ye shes rab rgyas was the one who helped re-awaken the cosmology at the Chab sti mountain, desacralized after years of neglect and forceful laicization; his geomantic visions provided important support for the more advanced practices of the meditation school of La phyi, later founded at this hallowed spot.

As the La phyi retreatants strive for liberation and ritual accomplishment, they are aided by their relatives and lay members of the local community. It is the non-*bodhi* oriented agents who in the long run determine the success of this facility. Their contributions of donations, food and labor are important for the continued existence of the community and the fact that the supporters themselves are lay, active members of society makes it possible for them to contribute in the first place.

It comes as no surprise that La phyi *sgom grwa* initially spread locally. The people of Nang chen *rdzong* and sKyo brag are historically used to leadership in the hands of ritual experts; by investing their trust into a local leader such as Tshul khrims mthar phyin, they reaffirm their ties to their land and its past, which is instrumental in today's ethno-religious revival in Eastern Tibet.¹⁰²²

Contained within this category of agents, an interesting group is formed by local government representatives, who gave their permission to found the *sgom grwa* and are planning to build a road up to Level I. In this remote region of the PRC, they are exclusively

¹⁰²¹ *bong ba la gser du mthong ba'i dad* [...] (gSal byed & dPa' brtan (n.d.): fol.137). For the entire passage, see above.

¹⁰²² Peng Wenbin 1998: 192.

Khams pa Tibetans, who are simultaneously fervent followers of Tshul khrim mthar phyin. Throughout their active support for the hermitage, they improve their image toward the community as supporters of religion and at the same time, they become successful in their role of mediators between the interests of the state and the minority.

When Tibetans spread around the world, they met with Western receptivity for Asian cultures that arose especially in the 1960s. This resulted in the emergence of Tibetan Buddhism as global religion. Since the 1980s, the figure of Khams pa lamas, also the ones from sKyo brag, continue to be appropriated by worldwide Buddhist movements. Even if Tshul khrim mthar phyin disregards fame, his popularity among the global audience is on the rise, especially given the Western tendency to treat meditation experience as central to the definition of Buddhism.¹⁰²³ For this reason, the demand for meditation experts on the side of the newly established, global networks of Buddhist activity is likely to grow.

The universality of Tshul khrim mthar phyin's *bodhi*-oriented message combined with the global search for lasting values magnetize not only local, but also supra-local and foreign contributors. They spread both the mythos of the snow-melting, flying lamas of sKyo brag, as well as the information on a living tradition which promises resolution of dilemmas central to human existence.

XII.2.La phyi as component of the new hermitic movement

In this section, I would like to discuss La phyi's contextualization within a larger network of other, similar venues. Its many-leveled connection to Ya chen *chos sgar*, a distant and doctrinally dissimilar hermitage, is clearly no coincidence. I believe that the close cooperation between these two centers is a striking modern example of networking of newly-founded venues for religious training, similarly to the described the 19th-century Ris med developments. The social impact of today's circuitry formed by the Khams pa *chos sgar* and *ri khrod*, as described above, has been growing rapidly along with their quantity, as they are taking over the place of monasteries in their role of local and supra-local religious authorities.

Looking at Ya chen, one discovers a number of affiliations not only with La phyi or gSer rta, but also with many other analogous sites in Khams. What is more, besides Ya chen, La phyi is also associated with various other retreat sites and *chos sgar*. Since these facilities for intersectorian training exhibit parallel traits and objectives, in the subsequent paragraphs, I will argue that the broad ethno-religious revival in Khams, discussed in previous chapters,

¹⁰²³ See a discussion in Samuel 2005: 288-316.

encompasses a specific current, that I will describe as the hermitic movement, for its emphasis on renunciation and association with venues for secluded meditation.

This movement is evidently well-contextualized among other neotraditionalist and reformist activities, involving religious figures and lay persons alike, whose aim is the religious and cultural reinvigoration of Khams. As I have mentioned in Chapter Four, the revival encompasses a wide spectrum of phenomena, which often overlap and complement each other. However, from among this broad range of activities, I advocate the refinement of a specific trend, distinct as a particularly uncompromising form of conservatism in its choices of social paradigms and a propagation of a radical life style combined with a decided rejection of non-religious ways of living.

I have already brought up the favorable political climate for establishing hermitages rather than monasteries. Against this background, the success of the new movement, as exemplified on the cases of Ya chen and La phyi, relies on six main features, which to a lesser degree, as I have suggested in the preceding chapters, may also apply to other revivalist trends in Khams today. The key features of the new hermitic movement are: 1) charismatic leadership, 2) a distinctive blend of neotraditionalism and reformism, 3) a popular magnitude, 4) *shamanic*/Tantric/meditative environment and goals, 5) millennarian traits and 6) expansion originating from sacred sites.¹⁰²⁴

For the time being, I would like to leave out the elaboration on the millennarian characteristics of the new movement, since an entire section below will be devoted to discuss this very issue with special regard to our case study. Let us now consider the remaining points, beginning with the issue of leadership.

Scenarios describing the establishment of many of the individual *ri khrod* or *chos sgar* across Khams are comparable. At the start, there is one charismatic meditation master, representing the authority of a specific Tantric lineage, who makes use of the political liberalization of the Deng era, settles at a remote location, usually a local *gnas*, either alone or surrounded by a modest group of disciples. Subsequently, his/her reputation grows and s/he attracts more students, most of whom are monastics with a keen interest in a renunciate life themselves. This is how minor hermitages develop into increasingly larger settlements. At times, they adapt their curriculum to their shift in size with a change in emphasis – like gSer rta bla rung transformed from a place for meditation to a place for study.

¹⁰²⁴ Compare the traits of the new movement as they are enumerated by Terrone (2009: 86); also see Kapstein 1998.

In whichever way these venues grow, they always preserve their *maṇḍala*-principle, which has their entire activity focus around their founding father. As a *ri khrod* augments in size and in local significance, the main expert-hermit's authority also extends over the entire community. This gradual return of chthonic leadership in Khams is essential to reinforce the collective sense of identity, necessary after decades of humiliation and extermination of Tibetan luminaries, masses of which fled their oppression and never returned. Those who stayed would at times succumb to the pressure and denounce their gurus or “*vajra*-siblings,” causing a *samaya*-breach that many fellow Tibetans perceived as beyond repair.¹⁰²⁵ Moreover, the younger generation of monastics, who like Tshul khrims mthar phyin, began their religious education after the Cultural Revolution, often had no opportunity for proper training. All of these factors generated both a quantitative void and qualitative crisis in the balance of indigenous power.

The renewed paradigms of leadership have therefore strengthened the Tibetan communities and recovered their conviction of the relevance of their traditional culture in the face of modernity and colonialism.¹⁰²⁶ Furthermore, the growth of the hermitic movement also constitutes an attempt to convince those critical voices in the diaspora, which point to the lack of direction, as well as ruptures and breaches that have occurred in the recent decades in the ethnic Tibetan regions of the PRC.

The most striking feature of the new *ri khrod* is their expanding size. At first sight, they hardly seem to suit their expected purposes – developing detachment and performing sophisticated rituals, whose effectivity can only be guaranteed in an isolated and peaceful environment. Be that as it may, the directors of large hermitages in Kham do not appear to believe that quantity hinders quality. Quite on the contrary, the liberal open door strategy and limited accessibility to outsiders are beneficial factors, which provide answers to the current difficulties with education and lack of perspectives for the new generation of Tibetans.

Obviously, these arguments do not deliver a complete explanation for the new movement's rapid growth. I believe that a more comprehensive insight into this matter can be offered through the analysis of two notions. One of them is the very axiom permeating both the Tibetan hermitic ideal and the revival of this ideal today, the notion of renunciation; the other deals with *La phyi* as an alternative society with millenarian traits. However, in the present passage I will omit the elaboration on these concepts, since renunciation was elucidated on

¹⁰²⁵ Compare Germano 1998: 70.

¹⁰²⁶ Compare Terrone 2009: 77, 86.

separately in Chapter Ten, and the next section of the current chapter will especially tackle the issue of millenarianism.

Both La phyi and Ya chen are new projects, though founded with the help of traditional models and through awakening local resources, firmly rooted in the past. The main novelty they introduce is the establishment of training ventures at sites which were not previously known for this type of activity, or as in the case of La phyi, at least not to such an extent and in such structured manner.

Secondly, they are mainly directed towards women. In fact, their highly egalitarian model allows for much more adaptation to social demands, as it permits entry to anyone, regardless of their age, ethnic group and previous religious schooling. At both venues, newcomers are offered a traditional, high-profile Tantric curriculum under the guidance of an experienced master. This unique mixture of neotraditionalism and reformism is particularly successful because it accommodates a whole compound of contemporary needs like the growing interest in religion, also among women, the call for education, the need to reinstall traditional social roles, the demand for the re-installation of indigenous authorities, as well as the commitment to the process of the re-mandalization of the local landscape.

Thirdly, the open approach to training makes it possible to accommodate one more important factor in the post-Mao reality of Khams. The reforms of religious institutions since 1958 have dramatically changed the economic situation and from the launch of the ethno-religious revival, the issue of financing religious activities at both individual and institutional level has become a topic of constant adaptation to the changing economy in the PRC. By allowing the trainees to leave for the caterpillar fungus season and come back again, the maker of La phyi shows that the new formula of religious education is realistically accessible to the inhabitants of areas, where livelihood frequently relies on the increased demand for this type of pastoral produce.

The combined revivalist strategies of invoking the past and the willingness to re-structure it resembles the earlier waves of religious renaissance in Khams area. In their nonsectarian approach, the activity of the new hermitic movement obviously mimics the Ris med association of the second half of the 19th century. As I have presented in the section on the 'Ba' rom revival, today's hermitic movement not only reflects several Ris med principles like religious restoration and ecumenic cooperation, but also recalls the Ris med masters and lineages, and revives its sacred sites, while directly borrowing from its language.

For all these inspirations, still more is appropriated. Spatial expansion of the new movement most frequently starts at the local *gnas*. Parallel to the development of the 19th-

century religious scene in Khams, the new ritual centers are not monasteries which expect newcomers to embrace one specific doctrinal makeup, while excluding another. Just like the Ris med movement, modern-day religious revivalists rely on founding *ri khrod*, perpetrated through principles allowing for a more ecumenic atmosphere. Other reasons for founding hermitages instead of monasteries also echo the 19th century Khams pa renaissance, which equally dealt with the lack of substantial economic means and the urgency for religious and social reform.¹⁰²⁷

Regarding the intersectarian cooperation with Ya chen – obviously, the support of the second-largest religious establishment in both Khams and the TAR after gSer rta bla rung is very beneficial for La phyi. However, these advantages are in fact mutual. In a new time, when strategies for religious education have to be re-defined, new alliances must be formed and that regardless of sectarian background. The shortage of properly qualified Tantric instructors in Khams is acute and cooperation appears to be essential. This phenomenon perhaps requires more scholarly attention – could this be that this contributes to the birth of a pan-Tibetan Buddhist identity in the face of the fragmented culture?¹⁰²⁸

Comparably to the careers of Kong sprul or mChog gling, the new authorities benefit from the hermitages they established, since they both legitimize their reformist activity and provide space for their original models of Tantric training. In addition to this, not only do the modern leaders pursue ecumenic religious education and exercise a broad outlook on Buddhist practice, they also frequently fulfill the scholar-yogin ideal popularized by earlier adepts like Kong sprul, mKhyen brtse or 'Ju Mi pham.¹⁰²⁹

Corresponding to the 19th-century quest for the autonomy of Eastern Tibetan territories and the appreciation of its ritual and cultural values, modern hermitages foster the Khams pa pride in their land and pursue a concealed political dialogue with the state to create niches of self-determination and autonomy. This tendency is also closely observed by the local communist Party representatives, who have already targeted the largest communities of gSer rta and Ya chen in 2001.

One other important factor which ensures the success of the new movement is its *shamanic*/Tantric/meditative emphasis. The special function that renunciation and religious

¹⁰²⁷ Compare Germano (1998: 64-65), where the author quotes mKhan po 'Jigs phun of gSer rta on the subject of monasteries versus the less formalized *ri khrod*: he believed that for a renewal of meditation and scholarship to genuinely take place, one should not rely on monasteries with their inevitable sectarian inclinations.

¹⁰²⁸ For discussions on Buddhist identity in modern Asia, compare King 1996: 401-436.

¹⁰²⁹ It is interesting to note that several leaders of such venues that I have met are referred to as *mkhan po*, but live the *shamanic* lives of hermits and Tantric yogins, like mKhan po 'Jigs phun, mKhan po A khyug or the Sa skya pa meditation master mKhan po Seng ge (b.1950) of Gwa gu *ri khrod* close to sDe dge.

vocation exhibits in Khams today was discussed separately in a section exclusively devoted to this topic, but for the purpose of the present discussion it must be noted that a secluded and inaccessible environment strongly speaks to the collective imagination. I have mentioned the topos of mountain summits recurrent in Tibetan *rnam thar* literature and in folk legends. Today, remote and elevated sites are not only affiliated with “mnemonic icons,” but as they are used for religious training again, they appeal to the local audience, who almost automatically anticipate a link of legacy between the contemporary hermit and the previous dwellers of the sacred spot. Therefore, founders of the new hermitages profit from the charisma of the sites – partly because of the venues’ status as power places important in local ritual traditions, and partially due to the magnetism of remote mountains and caves established in the Tibetan collective understanding of their natural environment.

Another reason for the universal popularity of the hermitages in Khams today is the fact that they seem to be able to accommodate the needs of the various types of Buddhist practitioners. Even if at the first sight, they are only suitable for the *bodhi*-motivated renunciates, their inwardly turned communities have developed a popular reach. The retreatants are excellent “fields of merit” for their, usually *karma*-oriented relatives, and if the director of the site is also a miracle-maker like Tshul khrims mthar phyin, he is able to magnetize the pragmatic seekers of remedies for daily problems, who are free to come and request the yogin’s clairvoyant advice. After all, the given master’s reputation, as seen on Tshul khrims mthar phyin’s example, is most often articulated in terms of folk beliefs (miracles, handprints in solid stone, etc.) or by means of a mythology that has received a wide popular acclaim like the gTer ma lore.

Meditation schools and *chos sgar* are especially interesting in that they do not encourage or rely on the exchange with the local lay community like monasteries, while still being accessible to the local people and pilgrims to some extent. By way of the open door policy and through events open to the general public, like the *’pho ba* courses or Buddhist teachings held at La phyi before an unrestricted audience, the *ri khrod* open the way for encouraging the entire community to contribute to the progress and expansion of their local ritual spheres. Such events are a unique opportunity for the often uneducated lay locals to approximate to the *bodhi*-oriented field, which normally remains closed to them.

Opening the new type of hermitages to the broad public is also facilitated by the conscious interweaving of different categories of ritual space at the premises of the group *ri khrod*. Again looking at the example of La phyi, its premises combine the highly private or even “secret” retreat cabins with the construction of a public temple, the sealed three-year retreat

enclaves with the communal *'du khang*, and the stone booths for the most advanced practitioners with the unrestricted pilgrimage area of the Vajrasattva *gnas*.¹⁰³⁰

XII.3.La phyi as a “community of liberation”

The following discussion constitutes a synopsis of the previously mentioned features of La phyi *sgom grwa*. I shall especially examine in which ways the characteristics of the La phyi project as well as the previously defined hermitic movement add up to a millenarian pattern recognized throughout recent Asian history, and in which ways Tibetan hermitic millenarianism is unique or transcending the social dimension.

Millenarianism has been classified in different ways.¹⁰³¹ For the sake of the current argumentation, I will cluster the different elements from several relevant analyses by diverse authors. Hence, I will consider millenarianism a collective effort, which is essentially religious in nature, performed to counteract a social, political, economic, and psychological crisis. Such reaction encompasses a group effort to achieve a perfect society here on earth. The aim of the ideal society is to aid each of its members in their individual liberation from suffering, understood primarily in ontological, but also in historical, social and political terms. The millenarian community proposes a period of liminality that will guide the individuals to deliverance; during this time, all their hopes are focused around the figure of a charismatic leader, who communicates the authority of supernatural beings and brings together the religious and at times, even nationalist or political sentiments. All of these powerful symbols or agencies are focused at one venue, where the ideal society can flourish.

It is true that the Buddhist ideology of liberation is highly individualistic, but it has also established itself as the official religion of many Asian societies, therefore it may possess a certain potential to articulate the collective experience of a crisis in the form of millenarianism.¹⁰³² Several authors have argued that the other-worldly Buddhist goal of enlightenment contradicts the this-worldly revitalization of society, as preached by prophets

¹⁰³⁰ Naturally, the overlapping of ritual territories had existed long before the 1950s and was at times consciously used as a strategy to promote newly established hermitages. Compare the chapter on the Ris med movement where I recalled Kong sprul advertising for pilgrims to visit his hermitage of Tsā 'dra for its special powers that could be bestowed upon anyone, not just on the informed Tantric practitioner who would use it for meditation retreat.

¹⁰³¹ Two similar designations: “millennialism” and “millenarianism” exist – and there is no general consensus as to whether the two terms are synonymous or whether they emphasize slightly different phenomena. In the following paragraphs I chose to employ the terms “millenarian” and “millenarianism,” since “millennialism” is frequently used to imply Christian movements and as such, operates within an entirely different religious and cultural context.

¹⁰³² Keyes 1977: 283-286.

of millenarianism.¹⁰³³ However, one must account for the fact that the majority of Asian Buddhist societies were preoccupied with the *merit* and *pragmatic* orientations, leaving the *bodhi* orientation to the ordained, who also accommodate other goals within their individual narratives of conversion.

Accordingly, the trend for millenarianism has been observed in different forms across the Buddhist cultures of Asia, frequently displaying a decided political (Thailand, China), or nationalistic (Sri Lanka, Burma) undertone. The Maitreya cult, the Pure Land Sects, the Taiping and Boxer Rebellions in China, the messianic association of Burma, the characteristics of the Thai or Sinhalese Buddhist revitalization all show that diverse Buddhist societies frequently expressed attempts to make use of religious symbols in an effort to construct a more fulfilling culture.¹⁰³⁴

Most of these movements emerged amidst intense social crises centered around the concept of power. Speaking more directly, they arise in the face of prolonged colonial domination.¹⁰³⁵

Several indigenously Tibetan religious phenomena, like the gTer movement or the search for “hidden lands” (*sbas yul*) likewise came into view under circumstances of political pressure.¹⁰³⁶ Within the rhetoric of today’s PRC as a politically monolithic construct, no individual voices for emancipation are permitted; still, I believe that La phyi *sgom grwa* and similar venues constitute an attempt to create “communities of liberation,”¹⁰³⁷ not only in the society-transcending way, but also helping to liberate individuals from the sufferings of the Tibetan minority in the PRC.

Martin Brauen-Dolma has observed that Tibetans today tend to recall the dream of a paradise on earth, because they feel threatened, deprived, and marginalized.¹⁰³⁸ This is due to the often recalled communist aggression and humiliation of the traditional culture. Furthermore, old values are problematic to re-implement since they are being challenged by the domestic and global changes in society, economy, culture.

The Buddhist revival(s) taking place throughout Amdo, Kham and the TAR as well as in China proper is but one current amidst the modernizing society of the PRC. At the same time, it occurs against the backdrop of an “exit from religion,” experienced by contemporary

¹⁰³³ These discussions are cited in Keyes (1977: 285-286) and: Malalgoda 1970: 431.

¹⁰³⁴ See Ember 2003: 407, Wallace 1956: 265 and Keyes 1977: 302.

¹⁰³⁵ Keyes 1977: 301-302.

¹⁰³⁶ See Erhard 1996.

¹⁰³⁷ I borrow this term from Qin (2000: i), who quotes from Levering (1988).

¹⁰³⁸ Brauen-Dolma 1985: 254-255.

China.¹⁰³⁹ Paul Vermander, who coined this expression, remarks that in the PRC, religion has ceased to constitute the basis of social life and the mainstream monastic Buddhism can no longer alleviate the collective and individual predicaments that have come up as a result of modernization.¹⁰⁴⁰

Unlike the many socially engaged movements for Buddhist revival that sprung up in Asia in 19th and 20th centuries and were lead by Ambedkar (India), Buddhadasa (Thailand), Thich Nhat Hahn (Vietnam), Dharmapala, Ariyaratne (Sri Lanka), the pursuit of liberation at La phyi principally deals with the quest for answers to the basic questions that underlie human existence, yet the key expedient is the reality the La phyi practitioners live in.¹⁰⁴¹ The *samsāra* they turn their backs on is no abstract sphere of suffering, but the actuality of life under the Chinese state, the trauma after decades of persecution that deracinated traditional values, humiliated the leaders, “de-cosmologized” the landscape and defamed the past, as well as the challenge of rampant modernization that contrasts with an underprivileged rural existence on the outskirts of a gigantic, totalitarian state, ruled by a majority perceived on ethnic Tibetan territories as foreigners.

For the scale of the crisis that Tibetans are experiencing in the PRC, it is credible to attribute the popularity of the hermitic movement along with their disregard for worldly things to millenarian tendencies present in modern Tibetan societies. This predisposition is becoming increasingly evident in Khams of the post-Mao and post-Deng era. Germano, who has noted this as well, comments on the revival of the gTer movement in Tibetan areas of the PRC in this manner:

However, I would argue that his renovated Ter includes a strong nationalist subcurrent in its romantic-historical focus on the Camelot of Tibet’s Once and Future King, its reanimating of uniquely Tibetan pure lands even as Chinese technology and colonization attempt to reshape that same geography, and the millenarian overtones of its miraculous revelations indicating the reemergence of the Buddha’s potent authority and involvement with Tibet in the face of the onslaught of modernity.¹⁰⁴²

The radical emphasis on liberation in one lifetime articulated through the process of renunciation, which involves social detachment in order to train in soteriologically oriented methodology expounded by a living saint, as well as the employment of charisma and magic to inspire lay folk combine to a blend that describes La phyi as a center with a decided

¹⁰³⁹ Vermander 2009.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Vermander 2009.

¹⁰⁴¹ Queen & King 1996.

¹⁰⁴² Germano 1998: 93.

millenarian orientation. Moreover, typical for a millenarian “revitalization movement” as described by Wallace, is the concentration around a mystic who channels the authority of supernatural beings. As he magnetizes followers, in time, even the most *shamanic* of masters will develop an organization in order to ensure the future of his lineage:

A small clique of special disciples (often including a few already influential men) clusters about the prophet and an embryonic campaign organization develops with three orders of personnel: the prophet; the disciples; and the followers.¹⁰⁴³

Precisely this is how Tshul khrim mthar phyin’s influence developed along with the popularity of his project. This pattern also invokes an association with similar phenomena in 20th century Thailand or Burma described by Tambiah, who devoted much attention to cults surrounding living meditation masters and the worldly agencies of those saints, who were at times even credited with founding cities.¹⁰⁴⁴

Although the early ’Ba’ rom hermits at Nang chen did establish the foundations of centralized political authority, by no means can one discover a corresponding ambition in the agency of the renunciate hermit Tshul khrim mthar phyin, whose charisma magnetizes followers from the entire territory of that former kingdom and beyond. He launched his project as a *minzu* member, allowed to express himself strictly within the limits of the PRC’s policies on religious freedom, and in order for his project to survive, his agency must remain politically neutral. Moreover, as a dedicated ascetic himself, his main interest lies in teaching meditation to a new generation of practitioners, reviving the yogic practices of the ’Ba’ rom school with the aid of the traditional Karma pa alliance.

However, his ritual agency spreads wider. Tshul khrim mthar phyin hands pieces of his robe as amulet, wears the single white cotton cloth as a sign of the ability to melt snow with his body heat, and is said to have left his handprint in stone. Through these acts, much in the style of his ideals Mi la ras pa and Karma nor bu, he found a way to translate the highly esoteric tradition of Mahāmudrā into the language of folk beliefs and miracles, which aids in popularizing the elusive practices of the hermits among potential disciples and lay donors. He explains:

When you practice *rtsa rlung* and Mahāmudrā, you do not need to eat much; neither do you need [warm] clothes. You can fast for some time and gradually you will need no food and rely on the *bcud len* like Mi la ras pa.

¹⁰⁴³ Wallace 1956: 273.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Tambiah 1988: 293-334. For the discussion of charisma in Tibetan millenarian movements, see Brauen-Dolma 1985: 254.

Rather than being a mere advertisement of specific yogic techniques addressed to the religious elite, this way of describing the qualities (*yon tan*) of an accomplished Mahāmudrā practitioner has profound consequences for the broader society. Tshul khrims mthar phyin's physical presence is crucial, since in a period of post-traumatic revival, the theme of the radical transformation of the body into a perfect representation of tradition plays a great role. As Tambiah notes, masters like the La phyi *ras pa* commonly attract the attention of many and become focal points for millenarian tendencies.¹⁰⁴⁵

This is clear in Tshul khrims mthar phyin's case, who as “the people's saint” seems to enjoy more popularity on the local and supra-local level than the *clerical* mystic gSal dga'. Tshul khrims mthar phyin attracts many individuals who are steered with diverse motives; they turn to him, for he has the power to resurrect their traditional culture and re-endow it with validity in the contemporary reality. In his role as a Tantric guru, he emerges as a universal liberator. As a yogin who yet again tamed the wild landscape of Chab sti after a time of desacralization, he becomes the “cosmocrator” as termed by Tambiah in his discussion on the agency of messianic forest-monk saints.¹⁰⁴⁶

I have described how the curriculum binds the practitioner to the guru. Close connection to a charismatic personality offers assistance which is indispensable in a time of crisis. The guru as embodiment of Tantric tradition re-assures of the unbroken continuity with the past, which is why he is able to offer answers to existential questions and aid in identity construction even in today's “de-cosmologized” reality of Yushu TAP and Khams. The disciples become the chosen folk, whose fortunate *karma* made it possible for them to understand the value of renunciation and to strive for liberation “in this body and life” under the guidance of “The Third Mi la ras pa.” Additionally, by following Tshul khrims mthar phyin's example, people define their selves not only in accordance with the tradition, but also against modernity, consumerism, colonization and in opposition to the belief widespread among the Tibetan refugee communities – that PRC's Tibetan areas are a post-catastrophic zone with a shattered past, no indigenous leadership and bleak future prospects. *Vis-à-vis* this allegation of powerlessness, and in the face of Chinese state authority, Tshul khrims mthar phyin and his disciples act autonomously, reshaping their identities in a zone of concentrated local power.

Parallel to the Ris med era, the contemporary hermitic movement does not centralize its activities at monasteries, but at the various *ri khrod* such as La phyi. On the other hand, the conservatism of the hermitic leaders contains reformist undercurrents going much further than

¹⁰⁴⁵ Tambiah 1988: 334.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Tambiah 1988: 304.

in the 19th century. The initiative of renowned lamas like Tshul khrims mthar phyin who spread the most advanced Tantric methods does not only involve religious elites, but also a previously underprivileged group – women, as well as the lay folk. Social reform occurs in venues like La phyi subliminally, even if the hermit's identity does not derive from their social function, which is why hermitages constitute “inwardly turned” *maṇḍalas*.

Although the construction of the ascetic self derives from the discipline of renunciation, performed in solitude and secrecy, La phyi still provides important service to the community. Speaking in emic terms, Buddhist practice fosters personal transformation in the larger context of society that the hermit never fully abandons through the practice of *bodhicitta*. As practitioners transform, their influence is expected to change the society. This culturally imbibed optimism will in times of crisis lead to the projection of millenarian or even messianic expectations onto accomplished hermits and their venues of practice.

Meditation schools are especially interesting in that if they do not encourage lay involvement like monasteries, they are still accessible to some extent. Their architecture is carefully designed to illustrate the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology and the didactics of various hierarchies, where everyone can locate their individual motivation and level of maturity. Hence, it generates a safe heaven, offering refuge (in both senses of the words: as in the Buddhist *skyabs* and in general) to anyone who appreciates these values, regardless of gender, ethnicity and background. Through a re-creation of the coherent reality of old sKyo brag, traditional cosmology is applied to form an inclusivist paradise, which will continue to flourish, since it remains accessible to many and at the same time, the openness and the religious orientation of group hermitages like La phyi divert suspicions of creating spheres of political struggle and nationalism.¹⁰⁴⁷

The revival of the traditional universe of Tibetan Buddhist values bears traces of recalling a lost world. At La phyi, the lack of virtually any modern amenities shocks even Tibetans, especially the urban ones, but this is a deliberate effect. The sight of the simple mud brick huts, the red-robed renunciates and their white-clad master has the ability to transport one from the uncertain modernity back in time and into a dream about the past of sKyo brag. Consequently, La phyi *sgom grwa* is constructed as a persuasive reminiscence of the kingdom of Nang chen as “realm of meditators” and “home of the cotton-clad yogins,” in the longing after the long-gone Buddhist paradise, where, as the legend goes, everyone was a practitioner of advanced yogas, realized masters could fly from one cave to another, and monarchs from

¹⁰⁴⁷ Compare a discussion on a politically engaged Buddhism among the Tibetan diaspora and elsewhere in Asia: King 1996: 422-435.

entire Asia hailed the ritual expertise of the sKyo brag yogins. As such, the advocated return to the past also recalls the era when sKyo brag and Nang chen focused much political weight.

In opposition to the unification of power in the Chinese state, Tshul khriims mthar phyin and his supporters summon specific elements of local history, recalling the time when Nang chen was consolidated under the authority of master-hermits, or more recently, when monastic centers like sKyo brag held real political authority. As I have described, before 1950 at this semi-autonomous religious district, virtually every form of leadership and education was religious; today, the agents of La phyi attempt to condense these elements of power into one venue once again. Since in the PRC, power officially flows from state and religion has become a matter of individual creed as subject of competition on the officially approved market of values, on a local level, it is crucial for the resolution of the collective “identity crisis” that religious enterprises like La phyi restore religion to its former status of power.

Richard Valantasis has said that asceticism is “designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity.”¹⁰⁴⁸ By reproducing indigenous ritual texts, implanted in the local landscape, history and in the bodies of sKyo brag’s religious authorities, the hermits of La phyi are writing an alternative script to counteract the ideology that has deceived and suppressed them and continues to impose irrelevant social roles. As Samuel has noted, Tantric Buddhism is a perfect tool for achieving this purpose, since already in the pre-modern Tibetan societies, it served as “nomadic science” against state control and uniformity.¹⁰⁴⁹

The sense of autonomy that La phyi offers encourages its inhabitants and visitors to divert from the official role models predetermined by the Chinese communist state and design the narratives of their lives in accordance with their own traditional paradigms of Mi la ras pa, sKyo brag Chos rje, Karma nor bu, Tshul khriims mthar phyin as well as the ideals of lay supporters, donors, etc. Finally, they also receive a place where these narratives can be contextualized, an indispensable factor for the writing of a Tibetan life.

The individual transformation expected to emerge as a result of employment of ritual methodology with the support of the *sangha* can also be seen in terms of personality development within the discourse of Tibetan tradition and as such, opposing the aggressive ideology of social, political and economic progress preached by the Chinese state.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Valantasis 1995: 548. Compare also Goldstein & Tsarong (1985: 29) who use the same term in relation to Tibetan Buddhist monks.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Samuel 1993: 373, 572.

But why the growing infrastructure and community if the training should be based on detachment and carried out in solitude and privacy? The existence of the different levels of advancement of practitioners, expressed in the topography of the meditation school, reveals that complete solitude constitutes one of the final stages of this progression and is preceded by intense training in groups of a decreasing size. Therefore, the role the community plays in the growth of an individual meditator should not be underestimated, and a long stretch of the schooling period is devoted to creating an alternative society of renunciation.

In the context of the ethno-religious revival in Khams, venues like La phyi become places for the fashioning of a new society, which paradoxically emerges through assembling individuals devoted to the traditional and radical lifestyle of renunciation. The purpose of the new society is to assist a practitioner in finding their way out of *samsāra* represented by the life at Juella Xiang, Nanqian Xian and Yushu TAP. Most importantly, an escape from the crisis is not restricted to the meditators themselves, because at La phyi, the quest for liberation is a family enterprise as well as a social investment.

The employment of the typically Tibetan convergence of past, place and ritual is a strategy of power, characteristic for a neotraditionalist enterprise. At La phyi, virtually every type of ritual performance deals with remembering and re-assimilating the local and pan-Tibetan past, its glory, lineages and lamas. Since Tantric Buddhist practice leads to ritual and social empowerment, derived from tradition and its memory preserved in the society, renunciation can become a successful approach for handling an unresolved imbalance of authority between centralized state power and local cultures, located in its periphery.

This is how La phyi developed into an independent sphere of power, where the new society is engaged in the traditionally Tibetan quest for liberation, bound by its own rules, secrets and goals. Its unrelenting, fundamental emphasis on the cultivation of specific inner principles, which both consolidate and accentuate the other-worldly objective for communal life of beginner hermits makes it different from the monastery situated in the village below.

Tshul khrims mthar phyin is an ardent advocate of the prospect of liberation “in this body and life,” as exemplified by Mi la ras pa, Karma nor bu and the La phyi founder himself. The classical rhetoric of renunciation, comparing *samsāra* to a prison or a burning house, echoes the current collective post-traumatic disorder and disorientation of the PRC’s Tibetan minority. As the dramatic parallel is evoked today, it emphasizes the urgency for an immediate, effective refuge that would not only lead to liberation within one lifetime, but already on the way there, offer a sense of purpose and connectedness.

This way, what emerges as a salvation movement also yields quick social benefits. The classical *bodhisattva* ideal, which describes an individual re-connecting with the world in order to benefit all beings, serves as an effective strategy for an accelerated production of new indigenous religious leaders, whose acute absence on local scene is a reminiscence of the persecution, killings and exodus of the old elite.

The community at La phyi is a social group formed for the sole reason of generating liberation “in this body and life.” It is also a secret society which safeguards doctrines inaccessible to the non-initiate.¹⁰⁵⁰ It is closely bound by the figure of the guru, whereas each member forms his/her own intimate link to him, which occurs by means of the increasingly cloaked layers of the ritual apparatus, as well as by the secrecy with regard to content of the meditation procedures and the individual experience of this content. With the advancement of the methods, the sphere of confidentiality extends to the body of the meditator.

The secrecy of training, the bodies and the territory of the “chosen folk” of renunciates is protected on many levels by the different types of ritual means. The urge to secure the hermitage as territory of Tantric power is articulated by propitiating the enlightened and unenlightened guardian deities, whose traditional roles are today supplemented with the task of protecting the uniqueness of Tibetan culture. Today, through the clandestine nature of the Tantric training, the polarization between “the community of liberation” living at the hermitage and the secularized world outside becomes even more pronounced. Moreover, the fissure is transferred onto another level, illustrating the disparity between the distinctly Tibetan culture, whose effectiveness is a precious secret, kept solely by an elite of initiated representatives on one side, and on the other, the privileged group of policy-makers in Beijing, who jealously guard their monopoly to exercise control over state religions in the PRC, seen as public goods on the official market of values.

Far from being a utopia, the “community of liberation” at La phyi is focused on achieving an immediate resolution of the social, political and economic predicaments which befell Tibetan societies along with their incorporation into the PRC. However, its primal function maintains its distinct other-worldly orientation, as most of the strivings of its individual members are directed into accomplishing liberation “in this body and life.”

¹⁰⁵⁰ Compare Keys (1977: 285) where the author explains how millenarian movements throughout broader Asian history also formed an official opposition to the state and thus became “secret doctrines.”

XIII. Final conclusions: hermitism as a uniquely Tibetan resolution of paradox

Long-lasting commitment to retreat practice has been instrumental for the continuation of esoteric transmission lineages that lie at the heart of Tibetan Tantrism, as the Zhwa dmar pa has remarked, and I have cited his statement in the Introduction as an inspiration for this thesis. The hermitages of Eastern Tibet have produced and/or expressed the voices of the most ingenious and charismatic minds that both upheld practice lineages and were important social and political actors. The Zhwa dmar's recognition, the many attempts at what I call a "clericalization" of retreat and the rapid revival of hermitism today only prove that the monastic establishment within the "practice schools" is well aware of the religious, social and political impact of Tibetan hermits.

While drawing conclusions for the entire discussion on the implications of "traditional" and contemporary hermitism in Eastern Tibet, contained in this thesis, I will identify a characteristic dialectics of paradoxes, some of which are embedded in a typically Tibetan setting, determined by the specific socio-cultural histories of the plateau and by the intricacies of Tantric training; other contradictions have recently emerged or else were more or less consciously played up by hermits or by their support networks in reaction to the post-Mao developments. Nonetheless, the performance, embodiment and final resolution of these dilemmas by the Khams pa hermit render him master of paradox, capable of mediating between extremes and reconciling predicaments; a task which remains utterly insurmountable for other members of society. It is this unique power that defines the social and religious role of Eastern Tibetan hermits today and in recent history.

XIII.1. The hermit as a social leader

At a first glance, hermits who renounced their worldly life and dwell in a remote place away from the society and religious duties appear to be detached individualists solely devoted to the discipline of self-perfection. However, a historical analysis of the Eastern Tibetan religious tradition from at least the second half of the 19th century, an examination of doctrines that underlie retreat practice, as well as an ethnographic observation of modern developments reveals that this image is far from complete.

Obviously, solitude is an important catalyst for the complete immersion in the cultivation of the path, as is the endurance of hardships linked with an austere lifestyle. Still, the image of hermits spending their lives in total rejection and silence is far too simplistic to match both the

impact of hermitism on Tibetan societies and cultures. The intricacies of Tantric training have moreover proven capable for producing a plethora of religious and social phenomena.

Not only are Tibetan hermits far from passivity or dissolution – I have shown that they are one of the most culturally productive elements of society, who frequently evolve into religious or political leaders, and many a time their agencies have articulated both ritual and worldly power.

In spite of their isolation, hermits are empowered individuals who sustain and revitalize strategies necessary for the perpetuation of Tibetan religion and in the times of great crisis, entire culture. Having transcended the personal self, Tibetan hermits are empowered to become embodiments of traditional identity, and what is more – to embody the potential of perfection inherent in the nature of human condition. Present in Eastern Tibetan societies has been the anticipation for reconciliation of these two dilemmas; the prospect of their resolution has opened the opportunity, or perhaps even necessity, of waves of hermitic revival in the recent history of Khams.

XIII.2. The empowerment of renunciation

The great paradox of Tibetan societies, where renunciation is marked not just by ritual, but also social empowerment, has its roots in the application of renunciation as a highly affirmative practice. Detachment is performed as a rejection of values that compose lay society, but it is also automatically linked to the development of principles that are not only seen as the peak of civilization, but are also endowed with the ability of transcending any dualities that stem from the *samsāra-nirvāṇa* conflict. These principles are applied through the daily rituals the hermit performs.

Renunciation, regardless of the concealment which accompanies it, is always performed before a public which shares the same cultural values and goals. This is why I demonstrated that this audience accompanies and supports hermits from the beginning of their seclusion. At same time, the rituals become tools for transcendence and for this reason I referred to them as resource networks of transcendence.

Empowerment is implemented from the very beginning of the process of advancement on the path of renunciation because it is believed that detachment is merely an instrument for creating the necessary cognitive room for the transcendent values to be assimilated, so that the practitioner would be able to draw closer to the goal of Tantric tradition.

Moreover, since this objective is doctrinally contextualized in the Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* ethos assimilated into Tibetan culture long ago, by social agreement, the approximation to the

perfection of enlightenment is performed on behalf of all beings. As the training culminates, it is expected that the accomplisher will re-connect with the society to perform various forms of benevolent service. The whole culture of hermitism in the pre-modern Tibetan world was built around the social agreement on the swift results of this path, exemplified by *Mi la ras pa*, who achieved the highest realization “in that very body and life” in spite of his former crimes. This is also how retreat practice gained recognition among religious circles as a path of particular effectiveness.

But more than this, even if the renunciation cycle will frequently remain unfinished within one lifetime, precisely this social expectation of an emerging ritual expert, local leader, guru and *shaman*, is the rationale for the support and empowerment of Tibetan hermits from the beginning of their training throughout centuries. It is only ironic how in the moment of conversion, the very world the hermit renounces emerges as a network of resource and assistance.

Finally, there is one further reason for the empowerment of meditators in retreat. In emic discourse, through the rejection of the individual self and the discipline of meditation, with solitude and social dissolution as catalysts, hermits will transform their psycho-physical complex into buddhahood. This transformation, along with the maturity for a re-connection with society is communicated through a number of signs, interwoven into the fabric of Tibetan cultures by means of oral and written narratives, so that their recognition is a matter of re-affirming the “unbroken” connection with tradition.

Since Buddhism is a structure of authority, accomplishers will necessarily require recognition from the religious establishment. Thus they will become empowered to embody the goal of Tantrism – as their bodies become hallmarks of tradition, they manifest the final truth describing the nature of existence – *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*. For its universal appeal that emphasizes the unity of all beings and all phenomena, the transcendent goal of Tantrism is said to possess the quality to liberate all beings from the suffering inherent in conditioned existence, leading them to the perfection likewise present in their very world. This is how a realized hermit will eventually emerge as guru whose words mirror the sanctity of tradition and thus, his instructions can be applied as guidance on a religious path and his life as a paradigm for the writing of future life stories.

Hence, the re-connection stage of renunciation is vital for the perpetration of Tantrism, the emergence and succession of authority as well as development of didactic instruments. Thereby, as expert-hermits are requested by the establishment to become active through the continuation of a lineage, it is optional whether they will choose to continue the *shamanic*

style of teaching (Mi la ras pa or the modern masters Karma nor bu and Tshul khrims mthar phyin), switch to a more *clerical* style or incorporate more of its elements (like mKhan po 'Jigs phun whose agency popularizes monastic discipline and scholarship), or whether they will affirm both styles (sKyo brag gSal byed, Kong sprul and sGam po pa). Through their authority, re-connecting hermits will be empowered to generate boundless creativity of styles that have enriched Tibetan Buddhism for centuries.

XIII.3. The society of solitude

I have dealt with renunciation as a process, not a single act. This additionally implies that complete seclusion, seen as an ideal condition for most advanced practices, is something to prepare for in phases. Not only is this the rationale behind the founding of new hermitages, but it also clarifies much about the mode in which they operate.

I have demonstrated that the necessity of gradual preparation places the beginner hermit in a community of like-minded individuals, who train in a larger group and progressively work their way to total independence. In the initial phases, the ritual and social ambiguity of the practitioner, inherent in the process of liminality (and *rnal 'byor pa* does imply both someone who “accomplishes yoga” and “the accomplished one”) is articulated in the design of a special environment and the creation of a community, whose sole purpose is to aid in meditation training. Hence, not only solitary caves, but also meditation schools of different kinds have been known to exist in Tibetan areas for centuries. Especially the 19th century saw the development of a structured group training, which became influential among the *sgrub brgyud* in Eastern Tibet and turned into the basic program for the schooling of lamas. This group schooling is revived today in a large network of non-sectarian collaboration.

The position of individual hermits on the religious and social ladder is precisely marked by the physical position of their dwelling, which reflects the degree of their ritual independence and maturity for the re-connection. As practitioners reach the goal, they frequently establish a new hermitage to pass their expertise on to others; the new retreat venue is often located beneath the original solitary cave. This is how their lasting impact on culture and society can be etched into the local landscape – having tamed the wilderness, they are capable of incorporating it into their narrative of liberation “in this body and life.”

In the new hermitage, open to beginners, the lives of charismatic masters become paradigms for future generations, which will again help sustain hermits, their practices and venues. This is because all local legends of saints inhabiting remote caves inevitably contains a plethora of co-emergent role models – not just the renunciate disciple, but also the pious

villager, the pilgrim, the patron, the repentant malefactor, etc. That introduces a number of alternative, valuable lifestyle choices for the lay population, for whom the radical path of complete renunciation is not an option. This way social life, family and economic production can go on uninterrupted; yet, by virtue of the connection with the expert-hermit, the laity can also profit from the web of meanings that defines the Buddhist universe.

XIII.4. The renunciate as rebel and reformer

Given the ascetic nature of their task, hermits have always constituted an elite. This fact, combined with a ritual independence and social detachment has frequently caused hermitic networks to develop into a counter-power structure. For this and several other reasons, hermitages have shown the tendency to appear outside the existing systems of authority, described as "nomadic science."

The causes for which hermits operate beyond the established structures can sometimes be plainly practical, as hermitage founders may initially lack wider recognition and with it, also political backup and funding to start a monastery. Sometimes their activity might be restricted through the existing religious and/or political power structure. Still, they themselves show a preference for a more informal environment, which leaves more room for creativity and independence. Furthermore, since in Tibetan cultures retreat practice is always connected to power – the *shamanic* field of action – also manifest in founding a new hermitage, has often been used as stepladder, elevating more than one self-made man to the position of authority generally reserved for monastic reincarnates. This way, hermitic achievement and creativity inherent in *shamanic* action can become a vehicle for religious and social change, capable of overcoming any rigidity of ritual, political and social structures.

Accordingly, accomplished hermits may not only establish further retreat sites, but through their visionary experiences, they can access and communicate new material that enables them to launch new rituals or even whole lineages, as observed in the case of Ris med. Over generations, the movement spread throughout Eastern Tibet in such an overwhelming manner, that ultimately it spread beyond its largely *shamanic* context and influenced the great monasteries of the *sgrub brgyud*. Similarly to the early bKa' brgyud or Sa skya developments of the 11th-12th centuries, the Ris med movement first relied on their network of hermitages, which, even if eventually institutionalized, maintained its Tantric and hermitic essence. It is also this very feature of Tibetan religion that is being extensively revived today – seen as "non-political," modern Khams pa hermitism conveniently avoid confronting the rigid setup of government regulations, while it still appeals to local communities, as they find

gratification in their local expert-hermit's unique ability to articulate the collective discontent at the current crisis of Tibetan identity and lack of political voice.

Never explicitly political, the hermitages of Khams have anyway managed to accommodate elements of social reform into their activity. In the 19th century, a number of Eastern Tibetan activists who comprised the Ris med movement became involved in the creation, restoration and development of specific ritual networks centered around the web of newly established retreat sites. These lamas also became the first to practice this systematized methodology in their practice centers. Even if dedication to hermitic life was not their sole objective, which is why the process of their empowerment was more complex than the fundamental pattern I described in connection with the cycle of renunciation, still, they could find authorization by the religious establishment of their time, and furthermore, present a compelling ritual offer to their donors and temporal authorities, so that they could understand their own benefit from supporting the new hermitages.

This way, the laity could profit from the benevolent power of hermits and hermitages in many possible ways through the *bodhi*, pragmatic and merit-making activities. With the help of this typology, one will usually ascribe multiple motivations to an individual act; this has been true for the hermit as well. Even the most idealistic yogin is conditioned by history and society and thus may, more or less outwardly, project their willingness to instigate change in the social, political or economic sphere. Ultimately, this vigor will be interpreted as *bodhicitta*, also because Eastern Tibetan *sgrub brgyud*-hermits have traditionally been less politically explicit than elsewhere. For instance, several dGe lugs pa reincarnates in Central Tibet were known to enter retreat for the sake of covert political manipulation; or some pre-modern Chinese ascetics, whose very decision to begin a solitary life was often intended as form of political protest. In contrast to this, the activities of the Ris med masters were mainly devoted to the development of hermitism – but they still bear many traces of this-worldly initiatives.

In a similar manner, today's meditation schools form secret, alternative societies, which operate beyond government scrutiny, seeking liberation in soteriological, but also mundane terms and offering a safe heaven in the time of intense crisis to anyone who feels the connection with the traditional universe they recall.

Since the nature of the guru-disciple bond requires trust in the actions of a guru seen as no different from a Buddha, hermits can develop into reformist leaders in the religious field as their followers provide them with the unlimited credit of confidence. Emanating from the agency of the hermit is also the potential for social change, since traditionally, the hermits'

status of leadership and the venues for their practice could be approached in a number of ways, which include non-renunciates and the whole spectrum of expectations present among the general public.

The agency of hermits like Tshul khrims mthar phyin also incorporates reformist elements which accommodate social needs of the day. Targeting a wide audience rather than religious elites and most of all, including women, laity and the unschooled in the training in most advanced Tantric methods has given him the opportunity to offer the most underprivileged social groups a perspective for advancement, and through this, to develop an offer which helps resolve the many predicaments of modern-day Khams.

XIII.5. The place of renunciation as the locus of power

The Ris med hermitages, which served both as sites for the miraculous excavation of scriptures and venues for their popularization, became important points on the map of local tradition. The skillful appropriation of Treasure teachings, which invoke the authority of the past in the literal and metaphorical sense and their convergence with landscape of Khams, then threatened by outside forces and torn by inner strife, made it possible to transform the blurred territories into a clearly delineated sphere of power, autonomy and harmony, sanctioned by the past.

Since hermitages were often deliberately located on sacred ground or transformed into a holy place through the expert-hermit's presence or actions, they could incorporate popular rituals like pilgrimage or other types of ritual behavior that contextualized the given school, lineage or practice in a specific place; a mechanism vital for the perpetuation of Tibetan Buddhism. Locale-specific ritual practices and narratives like gTer or Mi la ras pa's symbolic taming of the female *deus loci* Tshe ring ma became potent instruments of communicating the power of meditation practice perfected through the body of the hermit, believed to be capable of controlling nature. Hence, hermitages have frequently developed into power places or the other way round.

Significantly, these venues often formed diverse alliances, as they also opened the opportunity for a beyond-institutional dialogue of ritual layering and networking rather than sectarian hostility or competition, observed at venues of "contested place" like sKyo brag and on the example of entire socio-religious movements like Ris med. For these reasons, at least from the 19th century until today, hermitages have played an important role in the different waves of religious and cultural revival, as networks of retreat sites moved beyond the sphere of religion and developed into broader social movements.

At times of crisis hermitages may even accommodate elements of millenarian rhetoric or help style Khams as the center of the Tibetan Buddhist cosmos. In 1950, the autonomy of Eastern Tibetan territories was ultimately compromised, and its cosmology along with the social system was uprooted and labeled as inferior and outdated. As I have shown on the example of today's hermitage of La phyi, practitioners again invoke the traditional ritual networks, defined through their affinity with the local landscape; hermitic acts of conversion along with the manifestation of perfection of renunciation again trigger the networks of worldly resources, supplying the hermitage with everything it needs to exist and to grow.

However, the contemporary performance of renunciation in a hallowed landscape has developed additional meanings which seem to be effective in terms of resolving modern dilemmas. The *samsāra* that contemporary meditators reject represents the current *status quo* in Khams, and the intense training in the Tantric tradition also functions as an affirmation of indigenous values *vis-à-vis* their suppression. Through this, the practitioners living within the boundaries of the hermitage are able to create an alternative society, guided by its own, uniquely Tibetan rules. As this occurs, its territory opens an opportunity for autonomous agency and fulfillment for all who feel deprived as members of the Tibetan minority in China, and even broader – for all who can relate to and appreciate the system of values and the version of the past it represents. This implies that the ascetics themselves are not the only ones who can benefit from their locus of power.

XIII.6. Wide-ranging profit from an elitist practice

The current hermitic movement would never be able to attain its current dimension, also in terms of social impact, if it was limited to the elite groups of renunciates and excluded the broader public. Yet through their contribution into the growth of the local hermitage, lay community can identify with both the traditional meaning of retreat as idealistic promotion of transcendence, as well as with its efficacy in addressing the specific problems of the Tibetan minority in the PRC today.

Combined with the favorable economic climate generated by the demand on pastoral produce as well as tolerance by political authorities who view hermitages as less nationalistic and politicized than monasteries, hermitism in Khams will continue to receive much support, especially in view of the fact that the radical emphasis on renunciation simultaneously constitutes a pronounced affirmation of a uniquely Tibetan, traditional lifestyle, combined with an active opposition to the social roles imposed on the Tibetan minority in the PRC.

I have demonstrated that non-renunciate supporters of hermitages receive the opportunity to counteract their disorientation and inability to develop a satisfactory self-image. This occurs through their contribution to the restoration of the social and ritual status of renunciates, especially the ones who exhibit the signs of maturity for re-connection. When they engage in the support of the local expert-hermit, simultaneously, a number of interdependent, traditional identities is revived – such as a patron, pilgrim or a pious layman concerned with improving their *karma* and solving everyday problems through the counsel of a saintly hermit. Once again, the act of renunciation becomes an affirmative strategy which reactivates networks that have sustained hermits, their lineages, practices, and places for centuries in a uniquely Tibetan structure of worldly and religious power. It is these networks that empower the expert-hermit to reaffirm the validity of Tibetan culture on their behalf. The result is not only the current boom in hermitism, but also much of the ethno-religious revival in Khams.

In view of the fact that the Eastern Tibetan religious culture did not just suffer material destruction, but also became challenged with forceful secularization well as with the threat of effacing ethnic uniqueness, lay society puts their specific hopes in the re-connecting yogin, whose maturity for leadership is communicated with signs recognizable through their contextualization in the local landscape and folk narratives. I have proven that these specific signals are central for the expansion of the hermitic movement beyond the sphere of religious professionals. Much more than the hermit's moral achievements, ritual skill or the technical accomplishments in meditation, a master's reputation for manifesting superhuman signs can activate the whole community, and then reach out even farther to magnetize the non-local public. Therefore, the benefit of retreat practice today extends over its elitist tradition.

XIII.7. Tradition as prospect for transformation

The control over one's body and natural environment, attributed to accomplishers of the highest stages of Tantric practice is especially important for the re-mandalization of landscape, reaffirmation of past and reinstallation of local indigenous leaders. As bodies of hermits become transformed into paradigms of tradition, they are able to prove that Tibetan culture is still valid for identity construction even today in a "de-cosmologized" world and can constitute a valuable tool for protection against foreign authority that attempts to undermine this culture. Through their accomplishment in the performance of tradition, ostensible in the transformation of the body, the expert-hermit becomes empowered to restore the traditional cosmology, including local sacred geography and social order.

This undertaking becomes all the more important in that the revival of the Tibetan religious elite in Khams must also face to the challenge of proving the competence of its leaders and their unbroken connection with the past not only before the audiences within the PRC, but also in front of the critical eye of the Tibetan diaspora.

Similarly to the *Ris med* period, today's Khams pa revival is carried out by hermits who appropriate the past as language of argument. Today, the non-sectarian movement is cited in a straightforward and open manner, also because the network of hermitages, rituals and religious authorities they created was diffused throughout Khams into the various practice lineages in such a coherent manner, that it came to represent that which the revivalists today understand as tradition.

The authority of the past today is focused in local expert-hermits who become empowered to embody tradition through their perfection of the Tantric discipline. These masters may be capable of accessing testaments of former glory through *gTer*, embody a lineage, a specific deity or historical master.

I have demonstrated that since the onset of Chinese Communism in Khams, the legendary figure of *Mi la ras pa* has further explicated its oppositionist narrative of an unconventional mystic who functions entirely beyond the established power structures. The emergence of *Karma nor bu* and *Tshul khrims mthar phyin*, modern saints extolled as embodiments of *Mi la ras pa*, has developed into a manifestation of "intact" survival and validity of Tibetan Tantric culture. Therein, the recent "socialist transformation" and "peaceful liberation" of Tibetan ethnic areas, as described in official state discourse, are opposed with the indigenous language of yogic counter-culture, which sees liberation and transformation in terms of individual spiritual victory.

The modern saint *Tshul khrims mthar phyin* employs his version of the past to oppose the official version of Tibetan histories as a chronicle of backward, feudal cultures. His is the past of deities inhabiting the landscape, powerful lamas, political autonomy, prestige as well as religious and economic prosperity. Through the perfection of yogic discipline, he proves that his revival of tradition is relevant for identity construction today and thus constitutes a convincing choice for determining one's own future. This way, he creates a narrative of success that his disciples can emulate to find their way out of the collective "identity crisis."

As cultural continuity is restored, contemporary meditation schools like *La phyi* become spheres of autonomy not just for individual practitioners, but offer a sense of purpose, coherence, agency and belonging also to their families, donors or pilgrims. The status of the local hermitage as an autonomous area governed by traditional, uniquely Tibetan laws is

emphasized through its protection by the rules of secrecy, penetrable only to some extent, so that the outsider is compelled to respect their necessity.

Inherent in the creative chaos of *shamanic* action is the risk of neglecting structure, necessary as receptacle for tradition. It seems like the fervent dedication to a hermitic lifestyle could also prove detrimental for specific lineages, as I have demonstrated with the example of the gradual decentralization and consequent decline of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud school. Ironically, contemporary 'Ba' rom pa activists are relying on this very hermitic heritage as one of their most crucial strategies of revival. Still, the modern hermitic movement manifests within the framework of the institutionalized and established tradition; it is so because without *clerical* support, *shamanic* agency loses ground and fades away, much like the *shamanic* aspects of Buddhism helped *clerical* monasticism to become established throughout the Tibetan world in position of local authority.

Since the authority of *shamanic* masters like Tshul khrims mthar phyin must necessarily be legitimized by *clerical* structures of the local religious establishment, the influence of Khams pa hermits endows them with more ability to reconcile difference, this time in terms of the *clerical-shamanic* contradiction.

XIII.8. The local saint in front of a global audience

There is one more factor that contributes to the growth of the Tibetan hermitic revival in an increasing way. As embodiments of tradition, expert-hermits have the power to perform and reconcile the greatest paradox intrinsic to the paramount message of Tibetan Tantrism: *saṃsāra* is inseparable from *nirvāṇa*. When expert-hermits transcend their personal and “worldly” history and locality, they are seen as untainted mirrors for collective processes. Not only does their influence reflect the sentiments of the local and supra-local Tibetan minority of the PRC, but by embodying the transcendence of suffering and the ultimate triumph of human potential, they manifest the universal promise of Tantric Buddhism, which appeals to numerous international audiences today.

The legend of Mi la ras pa, who manifested complete liberation and transformation into buddhahood “in this body and life,” was translated into numerous languages and continues to intrigue many around the world. What is more, the international public has already come to know and appreciate the ultimate narrative of enlightenment spread by the global religion of Tibetan Buddhism since the 1960s. As an increasing number of Chinese and Western disciples travel to the hermitages in Khams, the charisma of hermits like Tshul khrims mthar

phyin appeals not only to local, but also global addressees, engaged in the search for values relevant in modern, secularized societies.

XIV. APPENDICES

XIV.1. Photographs



Fig. 1: Tshul khrims mthar phyin on the “photographic *thang ka*” sold throughout northern Khams. (Photographed by Xavier Hazenbosch, 2008).

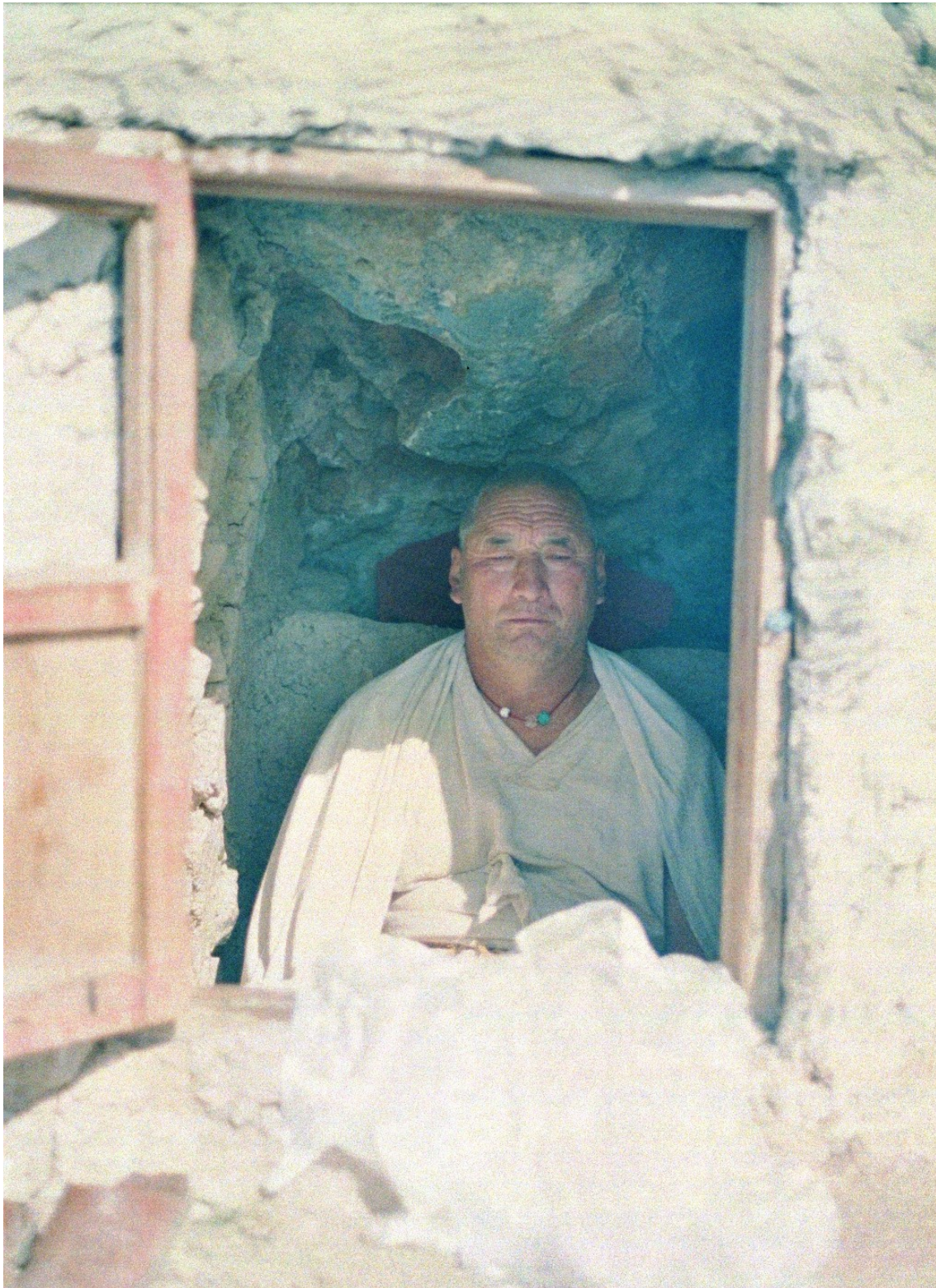


Fig. 2: Tshul khrims mthar phyin in his favorite cave-like hut, where he bestows Tantric instruction. (Photographed by Franz Etter, 2007).



Fig. 3 (above): Tshul khrim mthar phyin with his son Tshul khrim bdud 'dul. (Photographed by anonymous disciple, ca. 2006).



Fig. 4 (left): Karma nor bu bzang po. Historical photograph present in *sgrub brgyud* hermitages and temples across entire Kham.



Fig. 5: The monastery and village of sKyo brag. (Photographed by Xavier Hazenbosch, 2008).



Fig. 6: The sKyo brag *gnas*. (Photographed by Xavier Hazenbosch, 2008).



Fig. 7: sKyo brag gSal byed rin po che in the ceremonial 'Ba' rom hat. (Source: <http://www.chodraknunnery.org/individuals.html>, accessed 12.02.2011).



Fig. 8: The sKyo brag revivalist trinity: (from left to right) A bstan phun thogs, gSal byed, Tshul khriims mthar phyin. (Photographed by anonymous disciple).



Fig. 9: La phyi *sgom grwa*, Level 0. (Photographed by Rafal Radecki, 2008).



Fig.10: La phyi *sgom grwa*. Inside a meditation hut on Level 0. (Photographed by Rafal Radecki, 2008).



Fig. 11: La phyi *sgom grwa*, view down onto Level 0. (Photographed by Rafal Radecki, 2008).



Fig. 12: La phyi *sgom grwa*, view onto the Chab sti massif and Level I. (Photographed by Xavier Hazenbosch, 2008).



Fig. 13: La phyi *sgom grwa*, the *sgrub khang* on Level I. (Photographed by Xavier Hazenbosch, 2008).



Fig. 14: Level I, booth used for advanced meditation practices. (Photographed by Rafal Radecki, 2008).

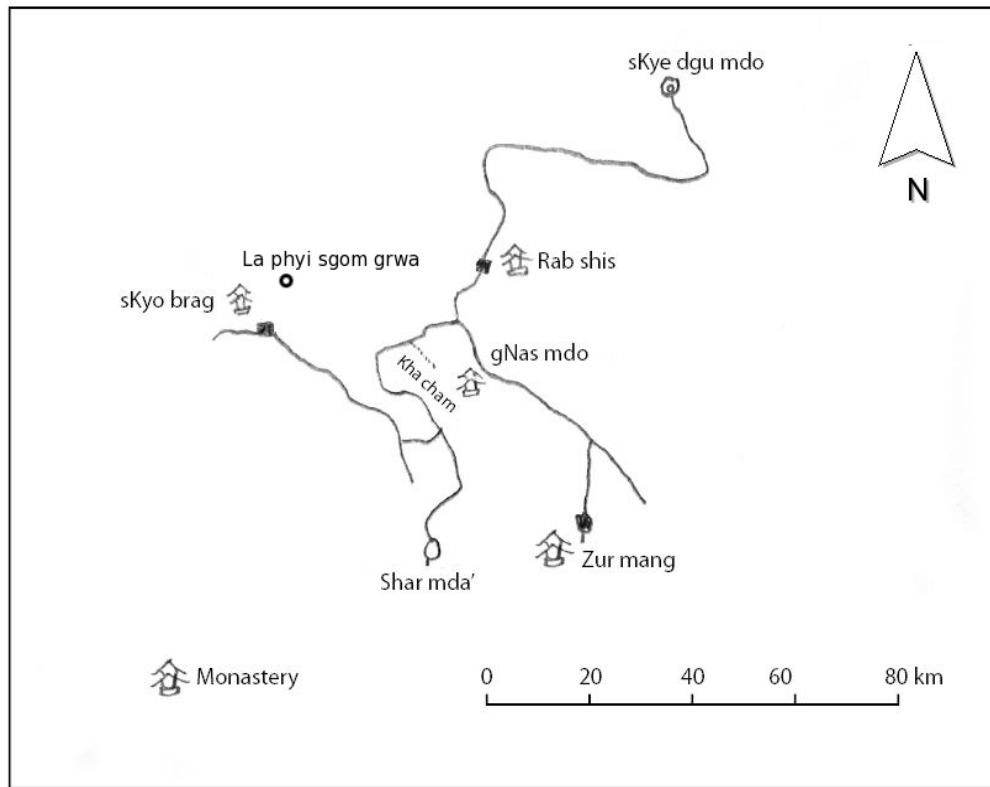


Fig. 15: Level I. This mark on a stone wall is believed to be Tshul khrims mthar phyin's handprint. (Photographed by Rafal Radecki, 2008).

XIV.2. Map of central Khams

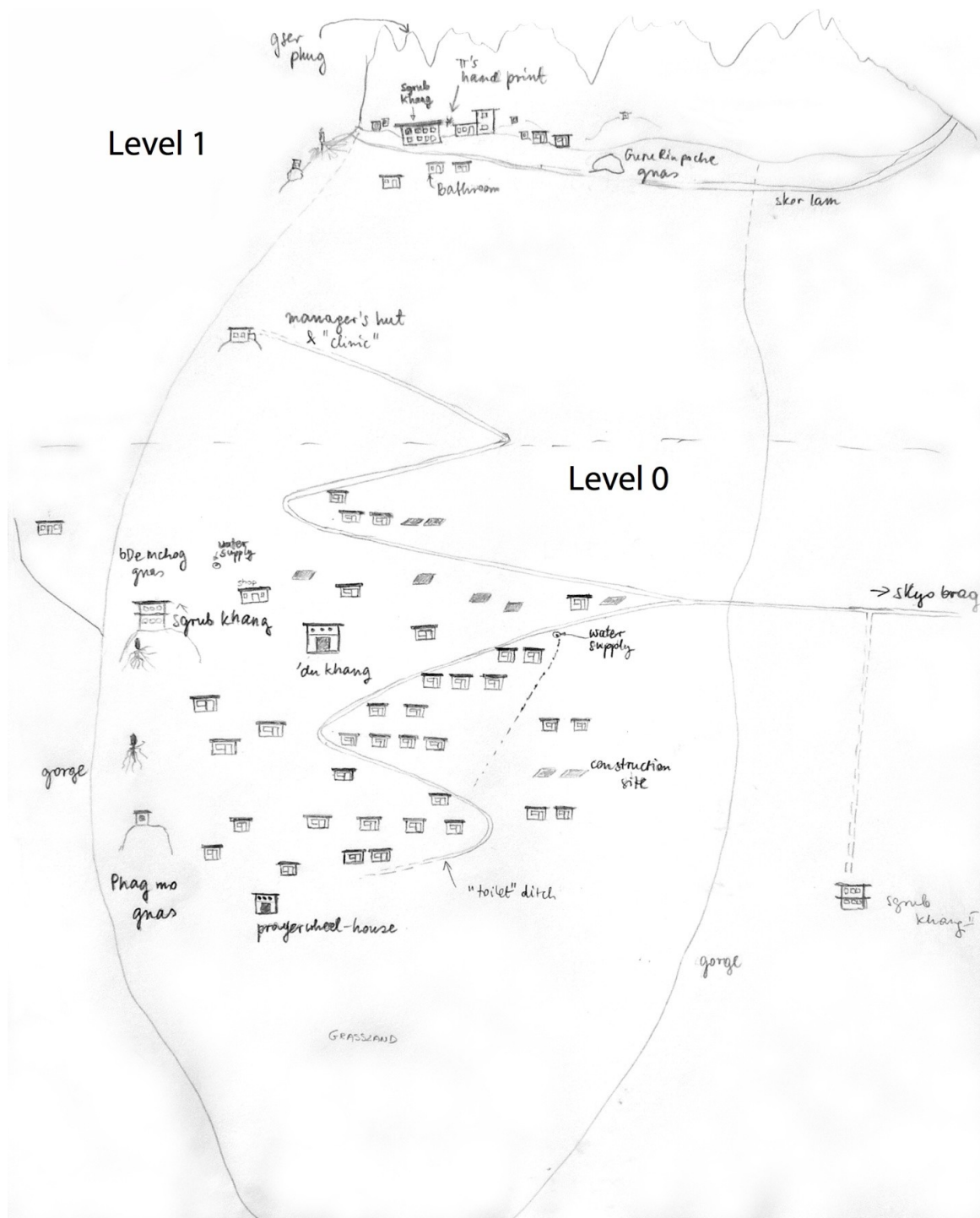


XIV.3. The area of sKyo brag with La phyi sgom grwa



Map by Rafal Radecki and Juraj Turek

XIV.4. The La phyi complex



Map by Rafal Radecki and author

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